

Forget Being the
VILLAINESS,

I Want to Be an
ADVENTURER!



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Chapter 1: The Empress of Galé

Good day, everyone. It's been thirteen years since I remembered my past lives in both Japan and the book and began my struggle to avoid being condemned. I, Serephione Granzeus, am now sixteen years old.

First Prince Schneider of my home country Judore found out that I had been reincarnated and tried to kill me after I refused to join his side in a war, so I fled the country for my life. Now I'm separated from my beloved family and friends, living in the Galé Empire with Emperor Gillain and my holy beast familiar, Lou.

Gillain, who had given the Serephione in *I Love You, My Wild Rose* a place to be and had been the only one not to betray her, proposed to me again. I'd been conflicted, but in the end, I accepted that I love Gillain. Having thus gotten engaged to him, that made me the empress of the Galé Empire. He gave me a relaxed life in a detached palace.

Speaking of which, people apparently started calling my detached palace the "Twilight Palace." That made it sound so gloomy... Maybe they had a weird idea of me since I hadn't been in public ever since our engagement was announced...

In the forest near the Twilight Palace, I sat down on a rock to take a break from training with Lou. Three butterflies fluttered around me.

"Aren't you going to send them?" asked Lou.

These light blue butterflies were the form my transmission magic took. The second I gave the signal, they would fly straight to my father, brother, and grandmother. But...

"If Prince Schneider finds them..."

"He probably doesn't care. There's no way he doesn't already know you're in Galé. There's no information in there that would be dangerous to leak."

Lou is right, but what if something bad happens to them because I sent the letters? What if I make enemies because of these letters and they pose problems

for Galé? I used magic to call the butterflies back into my opened hand, and they soundlessly turned back into paper. The pieces of paper fluttered up into the wind and vanished.

“I could go to Judore, but I don’t want to end up regretting having left your side,” said Lou.

“I’m scared to be apart from you too.”

What can I do to relieve my fears? If only I could sneak into Judore myself, meet my family without anyone noticing, and leave without drawing any attention...

I told Gillain, Asu, and my guard Sakaki about my plan over dinner at the Twilight Palace.

“If you’re going to Judore, then so am I,” Gillain declared.

I knew he’d say that.

“No, you’re not, Gillain. You have things to do.”

“You got hurt last time, even though Asu was with you. We don’t know the first prince’s current situation, so your safety isn’t guaranteed unless you bring a strong enough party to match him.”

“I was thinking I’d sneak in with Lou and bank on him not finding me...”

“You can’t underestimate him, Sere!”

I know. I understand. I know...

“I’ll make some time soon. Wait until then.”

I shook my head. “It’s okay. You’ve been so good to me already. I don’t want to hinder your work any more than I already have.”

“Then help me with the parts of my work that I’m not good at. That’ll make it even.”

“There are things you aren’t good at?”

“He’s not good at a *lot* of things,” answered Asu.

“He’s disqualified from contracting with me for not being able to bake cakes,” added Lou.

“Okay, thanks for the implied request!” I brought out a cheesecake topped with sliced-up summer oranges and handed each of us a piece.

“These are Galéan summer oranges, right?” Sakaki asked.

“Correct, Sakaki! They were growing wild in an unexplored part of the forest, so they may be sour, but they’re safe!”

“Galéan oranges... I didn’t know our country had seasonal fruit too.” Gillain gazed intently at the shining yellow fruit as he ate. This was his first time having summer oranges. *How rigid and flavorless is your life?*

“Refreshing! I give this four stars,” Lou decided.

Apparently, only Matsuki’s cakes were five stars in Lou’s mind. Matsuki had set too high of a bar for me.



“Have you all washed your hands, kids?”

“Yeah!”

The job Gillain had assigned me was to assist at the orphanage. I got it; it was something he definitely couldn’t do.

But not every girl inherently loves kids and is good with them—not everybody can be an angel like Sasara. I was reincarnated at around thirty, so I’d long since forgotten what being a child was like, and my life since being reborn had been focused on training to survive... Sad.

So I’d given up on treating them like children. They were...my comrades. We were both born in situations we couldn’t do anything about and shouldering unnecessary burdens.

“You all want to eat lots of good food, right?”

“Yeah!”

“And you’ll have to make lots of money for that!”

“Yeah!”

“But nobody wants to work for scummy adults!”

“Yeah!”

The fact that I didn’t look like an adult helped me earn their trust.

“L-Lady Serephione!”

The virtuous nun was goggling with astonishment, but the kids completely understood. Their eyes glinted with determination.

“Then let’s think of stable careers to go into so you don’t have to work for bad guys! Will you all help me out?”

“Yeaaaah!”

“Who wants to learn to cook? Raise your hands!”

“Me!”

“I’ll teach you Matsuki’s secret recipe for madeleines. I have all the ingredients here. Let’s start by cracking some eggs!”

I remembered that the madeleines that the monastery sold had been popular in Japan. People were willing to spend a little extra money since they felt like they were doing a good deed by buying them.

The secret ingredient to these was going to be squishberries that I’d picked in the forest. They would act as an antibacterial when crushed and mixed in, so the madeleines would last longer and be sold to the military. I planned to teach these kids the skills to sell them so that they could make a living as cooks.

“Who likes to study?”

“Me!” A few more kids raised their hands.

I planned to tutor these kids in accounting. They would make two balance sheets each week and submit them to me. Eventually, they should be able to work in trade.

“Who has a good eye for detail?”

“Me!”

These kids would be in charge of wrapping, inventory tracking, and display.

Their job would be to make a seal with the brand's logo and stamp it carefully onto each package so no fakes could circulate. We'd have the orphanage's logo and Asu facing each other... I'd obtained permission from Asu to use his likeness! These kids would also make good employees in trade in the future.

"Who thinks they're cute or can fake cry?"

"Me!"

These were my salespeople. I would teach them to master using phrases like "Thank you!" "Come again!" "Do you like it?" and "Would you like to buy another?" on customers, as well as basic arithmetic. They could work in trade or acting in the future.

"S-So devious..." Arthur, who had come along with me as a guardian, was shocked. This orphanage fell under the Nirva family's jurisdiction.

"Who wants to have a calm life just like you do now?"

"M-Me..." Fewer kids raised their hands this time.

"You'll be in charge of the home while the others are going about their business. Keep the house clean and take care of the little ones. We'll get you to a level where you can be maids for the nobility!"

"Okay!"

"Remember, no job is above or below the rest! The best results come from everybody putting in effort! Repeat after me! One for all, and all for one!"

"One for all, and all for one!" the kids said in chorus.



The Nirva Orphanage's madeleines tugged on the heartstrings of the kindhearted people of Galé and became a smash hit. They could last for two months at room temperature, so some people sent them as gifts to distant locations.

That meant it was time to develop the second product in the Nirva Orphanage lineup: matcha madeleines! All we had to do was take a bit of the flour out and replace it with matcha. Using matcha from Marsche was a good way to represent the union of the two nations!

However, we had to adjust production. We couldn't flood the market. It was important to maintain the image that the children were producing as much as they possibly could. That was why demand was so high that there was a long line into the orphanage every morning.

Once a week, Arthur and I would take a walk around the kitchen, backyard, and storefront. We made sure that the kids were working hard and making progress, and it had the secondary effect of keeping the kids on their toes and putting pressure on our customers, suppliers, and competitors. It got the message across that the store was backed by people who could hurt them if they complained.

"Ms. Director, Mr. President, how do they taste today?" One of the girls in the kitchen looked up at us anxiously as we tried the madeleines.

"They taste great." Arthur smiled and blushed. But not the director!

"The taste is fine, Tanya, but the browning is uneven on the edges. Are you keeping the oven at the right temperature?"

"Nils has a cold today, so Colin is in charge of the oven, but he's not as good at fire magic as Nils is..."

"Tell Colin to come see me after he's done with work. I'll check on his progress with magic."

"Nobody will notice that. You're being too strict," Arthur chided.

"People won't give us charity forever, Arthur. If we don't have something that can stand on its own as a product, then it'll just be a passing fad."

"That's true..."

I was just trying to insure us.

"Can I advertise that the kids have the emperor's second-in-command Arthur behind them?"

"Why?"

"Well, I'm sure there will be people who see their success and try to trick them, thinking they can get away with it because they're kids. They might try to overcharge for ingredients. Also, the brand can have more prestige if people

associate it with a marquis family!”

“Why don’t you stand behind them?!”

“I mean, I don’t know how much longer I’ll be alive. That’s how it is being human... I could die tomorrow. If I died, would you protect Gillain for me?”

Arthur had become more open-minded recently. I hoped that he would grow as close to Gillain as Sakaki already was.

His face hardened. “I can’t. I’m not as strong as you. I’d be dead long before you are.”

“What?! You should man up and tell me you’ll take care of it!”

He’d turned down the request, but I felt like I could hold onto some hope.

I took the defective madeleines that we couldn’t sell out into the orphanage yard. The kids who I’d assigned to watch over the orphanage were doing laundry as the little kids played.

“Director!” The kids surrounded me. The two who had been looking after them were about to come over, but I signaled for them to keep working.

“Who wants madeleines?” I called out.

“We’re tired of them!”

Of course... You’ve been eating them every day. I sat down on a bench and started snacking on some with Lou. Personally, I preferred them a little burnt.

“Would you mind sharing some with me, Lady Serephione?”

I looked up to see Regueid in a casual outfit—a button-down and dark brown pants. Arthur knelt next to the bench, and Lou stood on guard on my shoulder.

“What brings you here?”

“I’m here to inspect the orphanage, of course. I have Arthur’s permission. I see I have a lot to learn.” He turned to the children. “Come here, and I’ll give you some snacks as thanks for the madeleines.”

The kids gathered around the wooden box that Regueid opened and excitedly began to eat. It looked like dried fruits.

“I see you’re rather good with children.”

“I would hope so, since I happen to be a grandfather.”

Jeez, what brave woman married this guy? Regueid made sure that everyone had gotten some fruit and sat down next to me, greeting Lou with a smile.

“About the order you gave Arthur to protect the emperor in the event of your death...”

“That wasn’t an order.”

“Any request you make of a vassal is an order. You’re on the same level as the emperor. I overheard what you said and came to have a chat with you.”

“A chat about what?”

“About the emperor’s upbringing.”

I met eyes with Lou. Gillain didn’t talk about himself. I had just been guessing based on the lonely, icy-eyed Gillain I knew in the book. I nodded to Regueid to indicate he should go on.

Regueid happily ate a burnt madeleine and began to speak.

Gillain had been born in the nick of time just when his mother, the emperor’s third consort, was stabbed to death. The attacker was under orders from the second consort, who had already given birth to a prince. His mother died, and Gillain alone survived, born into a bloodbath.

He had no mother to protect him, and his wet nurse only came as often as she needed to breastfeed him, afraid that she herself would be killed. He grew up ignored and abused, deemed not to be of political importance.

When he took his magic examination and it was revealed that his magic ability was one of the greatest in known history, his own father, the emperor, sent an assassin after him, fearing that his position would be stolen.

Gillain’s eyes froze over. Having felt the touch of danger, he taught himself barrier magic and kept it active at all times. This allowed him to widen his scope of activity, which was when he learned about Asu.

He was about seven or eight when he made Galé's bird spirit Asu into his servant. He then studied magic and martial arts under Asu. When the emperor found out about this, although frightened, he decided to wait and see and sent Gillain to a magic school in the country.

Other students often pretended to befriend him and then slipped poison into his food. Behind the scenes, he had numerous brothers vying with him for the throne. The attacks escalated when others underestimated him because he couldn't fight back much while at school. When his arm was wounded, he sent a rain of fiery arrows upon the school; teachers and students ran away in confusion as they were hit. Despite his severe counterattack, he wasn't able to stop the hired attacker.

He was sent to the magic academy in Judore to study abroad because, they said, he had no more magic to learn in Galé. Basically, he was driven out of the country for a time because people didn't want to see him.

That was when Gillain met me—his equal, who also had a holy beast companion. He probably didn't love me from the beginning; he was mostly just intrigued. But he sought me single-mindedly.

"He was different when he came back from Judore. Before, he was indifferent to everything and just struck back mercilessly at anyone who attacked him...but he came back with a focused goal to win the throne. I assumed he was on the offensive to keep from being killed, but then I noticed him smiling with Asu at times..." Regueid smiled nostalgically as he recalled it.

As he kicked his brothers to the curb, crushed rival factions, and gradually gained influence, he was attacked by his younger brother, the fifth prince, and nearly died.

"Prince Romeo was cute and had little magic, so he allowed him to remain close, but Romeo was his enemy after all. I gave up on seeing his expression shift ever again after that."

"I remember that... He always reacted coldly, without expecting anything good from others. I decided that if he would protect our nation and bring Galé together, then the least I could do is support him." Arthur quietly interjected in agreement.

Then he became emperor just as all his melancholy was lifted.

“We had been prepared to be governed by fear. We all had guilty consciences over how we had treated him in the past. But he was completely indifferent to his subjects and eagerly began preparing to receive you. I thought to myself, maybe the reason he even became emperor was just to ensure he could live peacefully with you.” Regueid smiled. “To be quite honest, I think all an emperor needs to be is strong. It’s crucial that they’re stronger than any other nation’s. But when I saw him being affectionate with you, I thought...maybe the people will be happier if he smiles sometimes.”

One of the kids fell down in front of Regueid. He helped them up before continuing. “Things have been rather chaotic since you arrived, but I can’t help but find it interesting. The emperor looks so beautiful, so *human*, when his face shows surprise or concern. I like this version of Galé...” He chuckled. “I can allow it because both of you are as strong as you are.”

He met eyes with me. “Please, take care of yourself. If anything happens to you, the emperor will fall apart. You’re his treasure, his one and only desire. Now that he’s known that joy, the despair of losing it would be...immeasurable.”

After Regueid had told me all he’d cared to, he left for the next thing he had planned. Arthur followed him to see him off.

“I guess he went through a lot too,” said Lou. “That would explain why he has that messed-up personality and why he’s such a good match for that messed-up Asu.”

His past was darker than I’d ever imagined. If that was how it looked from Regueid’s point of view, then I could only imagine how much he had suffered and lived through. And he had been all alone, unlike me...

“I want to...surround Gillain with something gentle...”

“Hmm. If you say so, then I’ll help you out.” Lou licked my cheek. It tickled.

The kids came over with a rope. I’d taught them how to jump rope the first

time I'd come here. As I sat on the bench, swinging the rope in circles with one of the boys on the other end, everyone hopped over it.

"All right, three minutes on the clock. Go for a new record! Your goal is two hundred! Go!"

"How can the kids get so fired up over jumping rope?" Lou asked.

"Because they're kids?"

The kids settled down after using up all their energy and sat around me.

"Director, show us your magic!"

"Ooh, I wanna see!"

"You do?"

I'd stopped hiding my magic as soon as I'd returned to center stage. I had been afraid of Prince Schneider tracing my magic, but he almost definitely knew by now that I was in Galé, so I had no reason to hide it anymore. It wasn't like the magic academy was going to scout me either. I was in a different league now.

I had no clue what would be a hit with the kids. For the time being, I used earth magic to make a hand that crawled around on the ground, opened, and closed. It was like a monster from the RPGs in my past life! *This oughta do it!*

"What...?"

"Weird..."

One of the kids started crying.

Oh, the quality was too low! Better try a red one next.

"Stop with the hands!" Lou snapped. "Nobody's into them!"

Wha?

"Do something cute! I want a bird!"

"I want a butterfly!"

That earth magic was pretty hard...you're telling me I could have just used my transmission butterflies?!

I took out several pieces of paper and cast transmission magic on them. Butterflies flew out of my hand. I usually made them blue to match Lou, but this time, I'd added cute white, pink, and yellow ones.

"Wow!" The kids ate it up this time, and they started chasing the butterflies.

Transmission magic was the correct choice, apparently.

"Peaceful, right, Lou?"

Lou silently gazed into the sky to the north. I took the glass paperweight out of my pocket and held it up to the sun.

It's as shiny as ever, Nick...

Just then, there was a sudden flash in the sky. Wondering if I'd really seen it, I blinked. There really was a point of light in the blue sky. It was gradually approaching.

Is that...a UFO? I thought this was a fantasy universe, but what if it's science fiction? Shoot, are we gonna get abducted? Should I evacuate the kids? I turned my magic up to maximum power.

"Calm down, Sere!"

Really?! It's here!

"Get down, everyone!"

I cast defense magic on all of the kids. *Damn it, I should have learned barrier magic from Gillain!*

A bright ball of light fell in front of me. The light silently disappeared as soon as it touched the ground.

"How...?"

"You taught me a long time ago that the speed of light is the fastest anything can go. I travel on light all the time."

Strong, familiar arms embraced me. Inside them, I felt a magic just like my own; I smelled the sunny Granzeus scent of my childhood.

"Brother..."

“Serephione... You’ve grown.”

My brother smiled at me, his green eyes shining. I wanted to get a good look at his face...but the tears filling my eyes got in the way.

“Br-Brother... Ahh, waaah...”

I wrapped my arms around his back and gripped the fabric of his clothes tightly. Completely understanding, he just held me and rested his cheek on my head. *He knows that’s what I want right now...*

The kids resumed jumping rope. Arthur came running over to see what was wrong, and he froze when he saw me sobbing and clinging to my brother.

“He’s my brother,” I muttered to him. Arthur gave my brother a good look, nodded, and backed away.

We went to the bench I’d been sitting on before.

To be completely honest, when I’d released the butterflies for the kids before, Lou had mixed in the letter I’d written to my brother and not sent. I hadn’t realized he’d recovered it.

“It’s an honor to see you after all this time, Lou. And thank you for making arrangements. I wouldn’t have been able to come see Serephione if not for you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Mhm. You’ve gotten strong, Larouza.” Lou patted his head. My brother grinned.

I looked up from the same place I’d always been in, his lap.

My brother had clearly grown in power. His magical aura was stronger than ever before, maybe because of the light travel magic, or just because he wasn’t hiding it. He was the future Count Granzeus, a demon lord in his own right. His white shirt and black pants were the ones he’d worn when he worked in our domain. The stubble he’d had last time I’d seen him was shaved clean. His hair was long, as it always had been, and it was tied back...with my black ribbon.

“I knew you were in Galé, but I didn’t know what the situation was like inside the country. When you contacted me, I finally knew where you were...and I could come running to hug you without worry.”

He hugged me from behind and rubbed his cheek against me. I felt a bit shy after all this time...but I was happy.

“Did I interrupt anything for you by calling you here? I know I’m always causing issues...”

“Don’t say that... I’m sorry, Serephone. I wasn’t able to protect you when it was most important... Even though I swore it to our mother...!”

“No! I should be saying sorry for making you worry about me! Are you really able to just drop everything to come to Galé right now? Ah, but I’m the one who caused everyone trouble by fighting the royal family and running away...”



“Serephione! Nobody in our domain, especially father and I, wants to just sit around and enjoy the peace caused by your misfortune.”

Father... And the proud people of my domain...

“Don’t worry, nobody followed me. You know I’m good at sneaking into other countries.” My brother winked. He was lightening the mood so I wouldn’t worry.

“Um, brother, when I left...”

I noticed a huge magical presence headed our way in the middle of my sentence.

Voom! Asu appeared from a vortex, his wings spread, along with Gillain.

“Granzeus... I see.” Gillain’s face showed obvious relief—not a common sight.

My brother moved me aside and knelt onto the ground. “It’s an honor to see you again, Asu. Your Imperial Highness, thank you for protecting my beloved sister. I wouldn’t have been able to see Serephione again if not for both of your help.”

Asu chuckled. “You must be relieved, Larouza.” I interpreted Asu’s words for my brother, who bent down even farther. *I guess the way he treats Asu is different than Lou, who he grew up with.*

“What I did for Sere, I did for myself. You don’t need to thank me,” Gillain replied. “I have a lot I want to ask you, though... Let’s relocate.”

We went back to the Twilight Palace, and I cast soundproofing, sightproofing, and defensive magic. Gillain and Asu sat at the head of the table, and my brother and I sat opposite them. It was my first time making tea for my brother in a long time, so I felt a bit nervous.

“I heard most of what happened from grandmother and the saint.”

My brother had apparently grasped the general situation.

“But I don’t get it... Lou, Asu, forgive me if this is disrespectful, but how were the three of you together defeated by the prince on his own?”

I gave Lou a look, and he nodded.

“Prince Schneider was controlling Terl, the heavenly beast of the north. Unlike Gillain and Asu, the prince had taken over his entire mind.”

My brother gazed upward. “So, the heavenly beast of the north went berserk...”

“No, the prince was also strong. And I was weak,” I admitted.

“Serephione...”

“Tell me how you, father, and grandmother have been since I left.”

“Let’s see... On the day you left, we got word that you were attacked by Prince Schneider when General Avenger had brought him in and that you disappeared. We had no idea where you were after that. Father guessed that there had been an emergency and you’d gone into hiding, as per the plan.”

I remembered the beginning of the whole mess.

“Father immediately made a surprise attack on the knight school; he wanted to take the first move. He ordered them to send you home at once. He bluffed that his Granzeus magic told him that something had happened to you. The school has to be responsible for all of its students. Even if a student caused trouble with the royal family, that’s the school’s fault for not supervising them, and they’re liable if a minor gets injured by an outside party. Especially if they go missing. It doesn’t matter that you’re stronger than the teachers—your position is still that of a weak student.”

My brother looked into my eyes to gauge that I understood before he continued.

“The school told him that you’d suddenly disappeared and that they didn’t know what had happened. Father shook them by saying that he’d heard from a witness that the first prince and General Avenger had drawn their swords. The principal said they were looking for General Avenger to confirm the story, but he was missing. As for the prince, a few days later, we got an investigation report that concluded that the prince did go to the school on that day, but he went back to his palace immediately, and all he did was confirm something with you.”

He calls that just a confirmation...

"I had planned to fight back to defend your honor if the prince was aggressive toward us, but he was naturally hurt after the battle with you and Lou. He decided not to go to war right away. Oh, and before things calmed down, I went back to our domain to protect the people. I spend most of my time there nowadays. I split guard duty with father in the capital."

He's already stopped traveling...

"Prince Schneider has been completely silent toward the Granzeuses. I don't think he has some profound reason; he probably just wants to wait until the situation calms down. The school used General Avenger's absence as an excuse not to answer questions about your disappearance, and you still have a place at the school. But they couldn't keep it covered up. A student who was enrolled there quickly spread the story that you had been attacked by a prince, a general, and some magicians, and that your father was desperately looking for his lost daughter. Everyone in the nation got the impression that the Granzeus family was the victim. It's the truth, after all. And it's convincing. The more you underestimate public opinion, the more antagonism you garner, and I know the prince is bright enough to understand that. So I don't think our family has anything to worry about for the time being."

Father had used public opinion to his advantage. He had already been popular with the people because of his strictness in taxing and taking property from the nobility fairly. I was proud of him.

"Um, you said General Avenger went missing?"

"Grandmother's spies caught him right after and nearly killed him. I heard he got thrown into the depths of the royal palace. What a fool. I don't know what happened to him after that."

"Of course..." Lou muttered. I let out a long breath and closed my eyes. Even a little kid should know that would happen if you broke a promise with my grandmother.

I couldn't resent the general after all that had happened, but he didn't have what it took to be an authority. I couldn't resent him...but I couldn't sympathize with him either.

My grandmother was strict, but she almost seemed to be going easy on him, maybe because they were old acquaintances.

She'd dirtied her hands for me again. I had such a strong grandmother. *I'm sorry, grandmother...*

"I understand that the reason this all started was because Prince Schneider wanted to have you on his side to fight Prince Gardner."

"Yes. What's the royal family like now?"

"Hmm, things got kind of crazy with them. First of all, Prince Gardner was too focused on Maribelle and not doing very much studying, so the nobility started to doubt whether he was qualified to be king. The queen was really angry... Wait, I guess this happened while you were still in Judore."

It did? I was out of touch, so I didn't know. All I had was Cecil's information. I can imagine it though. Wait a minute, brother...!

"Brother, you know about Maribelle?"

"Yeah, father told me she's an important factor."

"H-Have you met her?"

"No, I swore never to meet her in person. So did father. We heard it was an order from Lou. I'd like to know the reason why..."

"Someday," replied Lou.

"I'm looking forward to it. So, Prince Schneider is working with Maribelle now."

"He's *what?!'*" Lou and I exclaimed in unison.

"Everyone saw them dancing together and acting friendly at a ball the other day."

"Wh-What about Prince Gardner?"

"He was angry, of course, and he protested. But he'd been neglecting his training, so he was no match for Prince Schneider, who had the heavenly beast of the north. He lost the argument easily."

Prince Gardner definitely wasn't weak or stupid, but with nothing but yes-

men around him, he couldn't grow...

"Oh, and everyone's talking about something crazy Maribelle said about that. Something like, 'Please! Don't fight over me! Which ending should I pick for this amazing hidden event? They're both princes, so I guess the more handsome one!' I have no idea what all that's supposed to mean."

That's almost refreshing, Maribelle...

"How about the queen?"

"She's grateful that Prince Gardner is away from Maribelle, but she's wary because she can't read Prince Schneider's intentions. You know him best out of all of us. What do you think of the situation?"

Prince Schneider... It's come to this... I cautiously selected my words.

"The reason Prince Schneider wants the throne is to prolong his own life and that of his mother, as well as to pursue revenge for what's happened to him. So defeating the queen and Prince Gardner is his sole purpose, and who he partners with is an afterthought. He failed to ally with me and the Granzeus and Trundle families, and the Trundles who were on his side of the army left, so he's in shambles. The magician's association is run by the queen. He probably made a heartfelt request to Maribelle as the only power he has left."

I doubt his heart is really that set on Maribelle, though.

"What will having Maribelle change? Grandmother said she was nothing to fear."

"Honestly, I think Prince Schneider and Terl alone could win the throne. As a bystander, I'd say Maribelle is more of an insurance policy. But, she has...a strange power. It's like she can draw luck to herself, or move things to her advantage..."

"I don't get it."

"When we encountered Maribelle before, she said she wanted Lou... Then Lou tried to go to her against his own will."

"She can control minds...?"

"I don't know what to call it... But it seemed like Lou's will won out when it

needed to.”

My brother gazed at Lou speechlessly. Lou nodded quietly.

“So, she could control me too...”

“Let’s just say there’s reason to believe that she could. Don’t get close to her unless you really have to.”

Gillain, who had been listening patiently, spoke up. “What is the king doing?”

“The king doesn’t seem to want to take a clear stance,” my brother replied. “Compared to his predecessor, who was a great man, he seems to be dismissive, or pessimistic, or maybe just uninterested in anything other than being king.”

I’d never seen the king in this life. I heard that even my father hadn’t seen him since he was appointed minister. He could have been living a life of luxury and tossing his political duties aside to the prime minister, queen, and ministers.

In the book, he had said, “Now is the time to use your magic. Annihilate them,” to me when he sent me into battle. Was he not speaking up this time because it was a civil war? Could he not choose between his sons? Or was he just indifferent?

“So, do you think a civil war is going to start soon?” Gillain asked.

“Well, I think it needs something to kick it off. Even if Prince Gardner started something, Prince Schneider would immediately take advantage of it to attack. Word reached Judore that you were attacked by bandits and survived too. It cleared Prince Schneider in a way, so he might have some room to act.”

“What if we let them clash and whittle down some of their forces?”

“That would be ideal,” my brother replied. “I wonder how long the Granzeuses can last before our strength depletes? I think the key is how well we make our case when things converge.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll fire things up and watch how it turns out. I’ll help you out when the time comes. It’s for the sake of my fiancée’s birthplace, after all.”

My brother knitted his eyebrows, suddenly lifted me onto his lap, and smooched my cheek! “About that... I heard you even had an event to announce

your engagement the other day. Are you sure you're not taking this engagement to my sister lightly? Is it just a distraction for Prince Schneider?"

Gillain raised his left eyebrow. "No, I'm very serious. I plan to protect Serephione for the rest of my life, so rest assured, brother-in-law."

"I mean, it may have been an emergency situation, but isn't it a bit hasty to announce an engagement without even greeting the head of the family? Shouldn't you have at least sent a letter asking for their approval?"

"I asked for her hand in marriage ten years ago. I hope you can appreciate my consistent, unchanging feelings."

"Are you really okay with this forced engagement, Serephione? He's so much older than you..."

"B-Brother, he's the emperor! You can't talk like that!"

"It's my job to determine whether or not I can entrust my beloved sister to him. I can't entrust you to a man who would be fragile enough to throw a tantrum over my language."

"I've worked hard to gain strength suitable for supporting Sere... Would you like to test me, brother-in-law?"

"Yes, I'd be happy to take you up on that."

"Why don't we step outside, then?"

"Perfect." My brother laughed, and the two vanished instantly.

"What just happened...?"

"It's like a ceremony to deepen their bond... Don't worry about it, Sere," responded Asu through a yawn.

Is the idea that they'll understand each other after they cross fists? What is this, a shonen manga?!

"Don't worry about it! Hey, I see Matsuki's cake in Larouza's Magic Room! More tea, please!"

I think it's illegal to go into other people's Magic Rooms without permission, Lou...

My brother and Gillain came back that night looking no different, but their magic was heavily depleted. Gillain and Asu went back to the imperial palace, and my brother decided to stay the night at my palace.

I replenished the charm magic in the lapis lazuli necklace my brother wore. I'd received magic from Miyu, Asu, and Gillain in the last two years, so my power was probably stronger now. I redid the charms for good luck and presence of mind, then added one for a safe household with his beloved family. He'd done everything he could just for Lou and me to have peace. I wanted him to have a happy home life back on the Granzeus territory someday.

I feel like I'm suddenly looking down on my brother now that I'm engaged... He can probably handle it himself! He doesn't need my help!

"Wearing this necklace makes me feel like you're always with me. It helped me stay collected while we were apart."

The charm for presence of mind worked. That's good to hear.

"Right, I almost forgot!"

My brother took a pair of green earrings out of his Magic Room. They were a translucent emerald, just like his and our father's eyes.

"I mined the emerald in our domain. It reminded me of when you were saying you wished you had the same color eyes as father and I. Take these as my engagement gift."

They're beautiful... Tears came to my eyes.

"Would you put them on me?" I pulled my hair back and up.

"Just a little pinch... Okay, next one... There, all done! They look great on you!"

Lou licked up the small amount of blood that came out, renewing our contract. A ring of light shone.

"You're the precious daughter of the Granzeus family. If things get tough, you can always come home."

The earrings were full of my brother's almost attack-like defensive magic to shield me. It mingled amicably with Gillain's similar magic. After finding out

about my loss against Prince Schneider, he'd given me something that I wouldn't ever have to take off, unlike my battle outfit.

These were proof that no matter where I was or what I did, I was a Granzeus.

"I love you, brother... Thank you."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and lovingly kissed each of the eyelids that shielded his emerald eyes, wishing for his eyes to always shine clear and bright, reflecting the truth.

"I have something for you too, Lou, if you'd like. We can match, just like the four of us used to as a family." My brother held a large emerald necklace out to Lou. The size reflected his great respect and love for Lou. And since it was so big, it likely had a good luck charm on it too!

"You call this 'matching,' not a collar to bind me to you...? Well, I'll take it. I've loved the Granzeus family for a long time now." Lou lowered his head, and my brother slipped the necklace on him.

I wanted to butt in and say, "The thing binding you to us is Matsuki!" but I held my tongue.

The emerald joined my small lapis lazuli, glittering from inside his beautiful silver fur.

I looked at the matching green on us two humans and one fluffball and chuckled, like I had when I was a kid and a new magic spell we'd made together worked well.

As I sat next to my brother and Lou, who was lounging around, I wrote quick letters to my father and grandmother.

"Is the emperor kind to you, Serephione?" my brother asked.

Gillain's way of being kind is difficult to grasp.

"You're much kinder...but I trust Gillain."

"That's good." He smiled softly.



"My dear Serephione,

Larouza told me that you're doing well. I'm so relieved to hear it. He tells me you've grown even more beautiful. I hope I can see you soon.

Congratulations on your engagement. As your father, though, I really wish I could have talked to you about it beforehand, had the chance to object, or supported you during that great task.

I respect your decision, though. All I want is for you to be happy.

So, Serephi, where does your happiness lie? Will you feel safe quietly living your seventeenth year in Galé with the emperor? Or would you rather take into account the possibility that Maribelle could get in your way and take her down?

If you did that now, though, it would mean fighting Prince Schneider, since he's on her side.

Will you move around the world with Lou to places where Maribelle's power doesn't reach? At what point would you feel that you've finally escaped her grasp? Will you attack? Will you deal with her some other way?

Whatever your choice is, you'll need to prepare well. You may not be able to put it off, depending on what you choose. Think about it and talk it over with Lou.

Looking forward to your reply,
your father."

As soon as my brother got to Judore, my father sent a letter to me through Trundle Guild, then Galea Guild. I looked over it once and then showed it to Lou, but he was too taken with the new creation of Matsuki's that accompanied the letter, a chocolate fondant cake, to care about the letter.

"Whooooa! It's all melty inside! I want my lost time with Matsuki back!"

No luck. I gave up and looked back at the letter.

I guess I have to be proactive... I wish I could just live quietly in the background of this world without being condemned, betrayed, or killed.

Will I be killed if I don't fight? Do I have to kill so I can live with peace of mind?

Could I let my father or Gillain get blood on their hands for my sake?

“What did Isaac say, Sere?”

“I don’t feel like having a serious discussion with someone whose face is covered in chocolate right now.”

“Gasp!”

“So, what did Isaac say, Sere?” Lou asked again after I’d washed him sparkling clean with cleansing magic. I handed the letter to him.

“Sere... I don’t want my time living with you to be cut short. We have to crush their unreasonable attacks.”

“But I haven’t even been attacked yet.”

“Have you forgotten when you almost got killed?! The party that starts a war may be at fault, but that doesn’t make the victim righteous. There’s only a winner and a loser in the end. It’s pointless to avoid getting your hands dirty so you can be the bigger person in a fight.”

“I guess it’s my fault for wanting to be a goody-two-shoes...”

“It’s not your fault. You’re just a kind person. Especially because of all the pain and messiness you went through in your last life... But even if you get blood on your hands, it won’t be the same as what you remember from last time.”

“Why not?”

“You shouldered your deeds alone last time. This time, I’ll carry them with you.”

“Lou...”

“We’re two halves of one whole. I’ll bloody myself with you and figure out what that illogical power is.”

“Even if it’s taboo?”

“If I did nothing and lost you, I would be lost in despair. Breaking a taboo is better than that.”

I hugged Lou and buried my face in his fluff. My heart felt clearer just by

touching him. The scent of chocolate mingled with the pure atmosphere made me chuckle; it felt relaxing.

“Let’s think of the most effective plan...and let’s do it together,” Lou proposed.

“Together...”



“That’s enough lava, Sere.”

We weren’t sure when and where it would happen, but it was looking likely that I would have to go up against Schneider, so Asu was teaching me fire magic on a bare hill not far from the Twilight Palace.

“Why? I want to make a lot, just like you did.”

“I was able to do that because we were in a desert. If you did that here, it would kill the forest. And lava flows from above to below, anyway, so unless you can fly like me, it’s not always possible to use it.”

“Should we practice more flames, then?”

“That seems best for now.”

When I made flames, I shot them from my palms, but if there was ice floating all over the sky, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with just two hands. *I want to be able to melt a large swath of ice all at once... Maybe I could use that thing from my past life? But I’d have to talk to Miyu about that.*

“Asu, I want to contact Miyu. What should I do?”

“Notice the flow of your magic, then close your eyes and focus on Miyu’s magic inside you...”

Just then, something touched the barrier around us. Asu and I shared a glance. *This presence is...* I relaxed my guard.

“The emperor wants to see you, Asu, Miss.”

It was unusual for Arthur to come himself. *Since when did Arthur start calling me Miss? Some kind of way of asserting dominance?* Arthur called Asu a bird spirit like everyone else in Galé at first, but those who could see him were

starting to call him Asu.

“Did something happen? You don’t usually come to get me.”

“No... I offered to come. I was hoping to watch some of your training...”

“Hmm... Can I have time to change clothes?”

“You have to change whether you have time or not!” Asu chided me. I was in my gray ninja outfit, by the way.

“Okay, I’ll go back to my room first and then head to the palace. Bye!”

I started into a dash toward the Twilight Palace. Asu flew directly to Gillain.

“What?! Wait!” echoed Arthur’s voice in the distance.

Arthur led Lou and Sakaki into Gillain’s office. Gillain, Asu, and Regueid were already in the room.

“Lady Serephione, why are you wearing...that?” Regueid was hesitant for once. It was a nice sight.

“These are Arthur’s old clothes. I don’t go out in public anymore ever since we announced our engagement, so I don’t need to wear a gown, right? I usually wear a soft cotton dress in my palace, but this is more comfortable for me since I’m used to wearing pants from my time in school and in Marsche. I don’t know any tailors in Galé, but I borrowed Arthur’s clothes from when he was younger, and they fit perfectly! Waste not, want not!”

I had arrived in Arthur’s hand-me-downs and boots. They may have been hand-me-downs, but they were from the son of a marquis. I wore a white silk shirt and black pants. They were both crisp, as if Arthur had only worn them a couple times. My hair was in a short braid.

“Arthur!” Regueid shouted.

“I didn’t agree to this! I only gave them to her because she said she wanted old clothes! I never thought she would come to the palace in my clothes from when I was ten!”

“Sakaki!”

“I’m used to seeing her like this from back in Marsche.” Sakaki’s shoulders slumped.

“It’s fine, we all know each other here,” I insisted. “Wait, these are clothes from when you were ten? That kind of ticks me off! Oh, and this outfit will make it easier to fight back if I’m suddenly attacked like I was before!”

I’d stopped speaking formally with everyone here since the engagement announcement ceremony. Nobody took me to task for it. Strength was what mattered in Galé.

I looked at Regueid and raised my right eyebrow. He smiled through an uncomfortable expression.

“I’ll personally accompany you to the best dressmaker in Galé tomorrow, so be prepared. Can we move on to the main subject now, Your Imperial Majesty?”

“Well... Sere, Prince Gardner from Judore asked me to set up a meeting with you.”

Huh?

“What does he want?”

“He says it’s to foster goodwill between our nations.”

“Why does he want to see me and not just you?”

“I believe he said he wants to give you a commemorative gift as a noble lady from Judore who married into Galé.”

That’s quite the stretch... He must be determined.

“What do you think, Prime Minister?”

“Well, he probably wants support. It already looked like there was a big chasm between him and the first prince, but it seems their relationship has become antagonistic. He most likely wants you and Galé on his side.”

My summary... I think the upper class of Judore implicitly understand that I was almost killed for not helping Prince Schneider in his battle for the throne and had to flee to Marsche...

“Does Prince Gardner know about your bond with the heavenly beast of the west?” Arthur asked.

“No,” I replied.

Regueid chuckled. “I thought it was foolish for him to have let you leave the kingdom in light of your bond, but if he doesn’t even know about it, that itself is what makes him an idiot... Ha ha!”

Hey, Judoran royal family, you’re being laughed at!

Gillain had found me and Lou in Judore in a short time. Prince Gardner had overlooked me in his own kingdom because he’d been slacking on his training. That was definitely negligent of him. Well, it was partially because I’d been trying to avoid being noticed, but Prince Schneider had been able to find me...

Prince Gardner...

The prince had been the sun to me in the book. We played together and held hands as little kids. He put flower crowns on me and kissed my cheek. It was the beginning of a little romance.

“Let’s be together forever, Serephione.”

We made time to be together even when we went into the academy. We were tutored in magic by the magician’s association, disguised ourselves to see how the people lived, and had serious talks about the future of Judore.

“I love you, Serephione. Being with you gives me strength.”

I loved him from the bottom of my heart.

But when Maribelle came around, Prince Gardner and I spent less and less time together. I practiced magic on my own, went into town to learn the people’s grievances on my own, and wrote him notes about my opinions on Judoran policy, only for him to discard them before reading them.

And then, the war began...and I was condemned.

“You’re not fit to be queen!”

“I’m disappointed in you, Serephione. Our engagement is over!”

“I could never make a righteous nation with someone with as much blood on

their hands as you. Maribelle and I are going to make a kingdom where everyone can be happy.”

I had no chance to explain myself. He turned on me with no hesitation and broke my heart.

“I have no hope left for you. Atone for your deeds by offering your magic to the nation until you die here.”

I was sucked dry of my magic until I died. The one who imposed the sentence was Prince Gardner. I died a slow, cruel death at his hand.

“Sere!”

I popped back into reality. Lou was looking at me intently.

“Sorry...”

“No, you were doing a good job of hiding that you were getting emotional. I think it probably just looked like you were deep in thought to Regueid and Arthur. You can’t fool your family, though.”

I looked up and saw Gillain staring at me with a slight crease between his eyebrows, as well as Asu tilting his head and sadly smiling. I switched my train of thought.

“What would you decide, Prime Minister?”

“I think you should meet with him. We have information about the first prince via His Majesty, but we have too little to judge about the second prince. Is he really just a fool? Is he a bona fide idiot?”

You’ve already decided he’s stupid either way...

There was no way I could stay calm while face to face with Prince Gardner, but it would be best to take the advice from the third party that was the crooked prime minister.

Also, I wasn’t alone. I nodded to Gillain.

“Arthur, send a messenger,” Gillain ordered. “Don’t write anything unnecessary. Just say we’re available for a meeting. That’s all.”

“Yes!”

“And Sere...”

Gillain tilted his head at me slightly.

“I’m not happy to see you wearing another man’s clothes in front of me.”

“Ah...”

I vaguely remember being told the same thing a long time ago...

“Y-Your Imperial Majesty, forgive me!” Arthur crumpled to the floor in the face of Gillain’s intimidation.

“Ho ho... Perfect, perfect!”

Regueid!

Gillain grabbed me by the scruff of my neck and led me out of the room. He left me stripped down to nothing and wrapped in a blanket in his bedroom until the tailor came...

My holy beast was no help; all he did was slap the ground with his front paws in a fit of laughter.

“Sere.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll wrap you in even more of my magic than before to keep you safe, so rest assured.”

Chapter 2: Meeting with My Past Life's Fiancé

Prince Gardner entered Galé.

It looked as if he would bring a large procession, so our diplomatic representative specified that he could bring up to five people. He apparently replied that he wouldn't come to Galé unless he knew he had the ability to protect himself.

It was a shame since he seemed to want to show off his goodwill for Galé.

Would Prince Gardner be able to speak with Gillain properly? I was a bit concerned for him as the love of my former life.

The struggles they'd overcome were worlds apart, after all. Gillain bore the scars of fighting alone for years, whereas Prince Gardner grew up surrounded by yes-men, hiding in the queen's skirts.

Had he grown a little after Maribelle left, or was he still under her charm?

I explained Maribelle's "charm" power to Gillain and Asu.

"Interesting," said Asu. "Will I get to observe a power that could control even me?"

"I'd like to see what it looks like put to full use," Gillain agreed.

"You guys! You can only say those things because you haven't felt what it's like!" Lou bared his fangs. I agreed with Lou on this.

"It really does hurt to see..."

"Don't worry, Sere. The source isn't here this time."

"Have trust in me, Sere."

I trusted Gillain... I'd decided to. But just because I trusted him didn't mean I wasn't anxious.

Gillain himself came to pick me up as I was waiting in his private room to

meet with Prince Gardner.

I was wearing a white shirt and black pants that Gillain had had tailored for me a few days prior. They were easy to move in and hide weapons in, and they were almost the exact same clothes as those my brother usually wore. He completely understood when I said I didn't want to wear a gown in front of Prince Gardner. My hair was finally long enough to do high updos, so it was in a ponytail and held in place with one of my grandmother's hair ornaments.

I was completely armed. I'd come to this day with that mindset.

Gillain wore a cape over a black military uniform since Prince Gardner was representing another country.

As I was about to get up, thinking it was time to go, Gillain put his hands on the elbow rests on either side of me from the front, surrounding me, and kissed me from above.

"Ah..."

I was suddenly a different kind of nervous. My heartbeat sped up, and my body went weak. It felt like a corner of my enraptured mind was filling with Gillain's magic. There was so much—it was overflowing, overpowering my own magic. His pained feelings were mixed into it. I was...being dyed in his color.

When he pulled away, I was out of breath. I slumped against the backrest.

"Why...?"

Gillain smiled wryly. "I'm marking you."

Marking? Asu mentioned something like that...

"You used to love the prince, right?"

When he pointed out something I hadn't even thought of, my eyes opened wide.

"That was...in another life." I looked down.

Gillain gently put his hand on my chin and met my eyes.

"Even if the prince has changed so much that he's become a hero and is unrecognizable as what he was, I still won't let go of you."

No way...

“You belong to me. I won’t let the prince have you, even if your feelings change.”

He thinks there’s a possibility I might fall back in love with Gardner? That’s the last thing that would happen. I’m not such a doormat that I’d fall back in love with the man who betrayed and killed me. And in my new life, I’m enveloped by Gillain’s rarely-spoken-aloud, enigmatic love.

“I’m too weak to move right now, Gillain... Come here.”

He brought his face close, and I kissed his cheek.

Pain, pain, go away. Go to that dumb Prince Schneider!

A troubled (?) expression flashed across Gillain’s face. Then, he gently kissed me on the lips again. I was full enough of coffee already. He then lifted me upright.

“Okay, let’s go.”

What... Oh, god... I can’t walk...

“Ho ho, look how well you two are getting along!” Regueid laughed.

Regueid!!!

“Sakaki, help! My legs are too weak! Get me a chair! I can’t sit in Gillain’s lap! A step below him!”

“What are you doing?”

Can everyone stop looking at me with pity?!

“You can sit next to me, Sere,” Gillain assured me.

“No! Some little girl can’t just sit next to the emperor!”

“Now that we’re all nice and relaxed, shall we call in the stupid prince?” Regueid asked.

I’m nice and exhausted... Lou licked my cheek and hopped down from my shoulder. I just hope this works out somehow...

The guards opened the double doors and the group, led by the prince, entered the room. They kneeled before the throne.

Gillain was the head of state. Prince Gardner was only a candidate for the throne, so he wasn't on the same rank.

Asu stood brilliantly on Gillain's shoulder. Regueid stood below him to the right, I sat to his left, and Lou was laying at my feet.

"Lift your heads," Gillain commanded.

Prince Gardner began a spiel at Gillain's words.

Prince Gardner, who I was seeing up close for the first time in this life, was still the same blond-haired, blue-eyed, shining prince that he once was. The bridge of his nose resembled that of Prince Schneider. Was it because of a broken heart that he looked a little gaunt, or because the queen was mad at him?

How disappointing... He's only looking at Gillain. Prince Gardner should have seen Asu the moment he looked up, if he was capable of seeing him. Asu had no illusion cast on him.

As a part of the royal family, Prince Gardner had a genetic capacity for magic three times stronger than the average person. To not be able to see Asu despite that...was just negligence. Even Matsuki, whose capacity was less than a fourth of the prince's, could see holy beasts! *Apologize to your own magic and to the people!*

But I was glad... I felt calmer emotionally than I expected. Being prepared seemed to make encountering people from *Wild Rose* less upsetting. He wasn't paying any attention to me either. Hooray for being total strangers!

I felt someone's eyes on me other than the prince's, though. One of his attendants? The big guy on the right with green hair kept sneaking glances at me despite his lowered head... *Wait, green hair!* My elbow slid off the armrest.

"Sere? Do you know him?"

Gillain looked over at me and then followed my line of sight.

Yep, I know him... Cecil looked up at me, his face a mess with tears and snot.

“L-Lady Serephione...!”

No way! He stood up and ran right at me! In front of the emperor! This is a historic event for Galé!

“Waaah!”

If I punched him, then I would get snot on my hand! I hastily reprimanded my weak legs, stood up, and swung a roundhouse kick into Cecil’s left cheek! No holding back! He was too gross for that!

Whoosh! Kabam!

The room fell silent. Cecil, who had been slammed against the left wall, had tears running down his face...and a smile.

“Ah... Lady Serephione finally kicked me... I have no more regrets in life...”

Crickets.

“Sere... Who’s that?”

Gillain’s voice had a rare hint of confusion.

“A pervert,” Lou answered in place of me. *Correct.*

“I see you’re Count Granzeus’s precious jewel,” Prince Gardner said. “It’s nice to meet you. And congratulations on your engagement.” His voice was bright and animated.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry to speak to you from so high up, Your Highness.”

It was a bit mean-spirited, but I wanted to make it clear to Prince Gardner that I wasn’t in a subservient position to him. You may think, does being engaged to the emperor really warrant that? But my position was inherently more than that.

I was contracted to the holy beast Loudarylphena, as well as Miyu. It would be tantamount to disrespecting the dignity of Lou and Miyu to take a humble attitude toward someone in power.

“It’s not a problem... You’re beautiful. Beautiful as well as strong! May I

submit a complaint to the emperor for taking such a treasure from our kingdom?”

“You flatter me. I must not look womanly to you in this outfit.”

Doesn't the prince like fluffy, pink girls?

“What?! Your beauty combined with your strength creates the ultimate beauty!” Cecil choked out.

Cecil was bothering me after his quick recovery, so I made my way over to him briskly and pressed my pointer finger into his forehead. This was a new type of magic—Paralysis. It rendered the recipient’s brain unable to send the command to move their limbs. I’d created it because Lou couldn’t wait patiently before he ate his cake. I had to touch the target directly to use it, so I didn’t often get the chance.

“I-I won’t move!”

Why are you happy?! I should fix it so you can't move your mouth either.

I turned to the throne and quietly explained that Cecil was a pervert from my class in knight school. Gillain, Asu, and Regueid all had weird looks on their faces. *I promise knight school isn't just a bunch of perverts!*



Gillain brought the conversation back on track. "I first encountered Serephione when I studied abroad in your country. I feel extremely lucky to have met her. No other lady could be as lovely and talented as her."

"It was a miracle that such a wonderful lady was not yet engaged when you met her," Prince Gardner replied.

Gillain was implying "You don't have the right to complain to me." If he looked soft, Prince Gardner might ask for something stupid, like military aid. There was also Regueid's second sound channel saying, "You must be dumb to have let someone with a holy beast go."

"But I hear that you haven't returned to Judore in a long time," Prince Gardner said to me. "Don't you miss your family? Would you like to come back with me?"

"It's true that I miss my father dearly... But I was almost killed in Judore. I can't go back as long as the person who attacked me is still there. I would be afraid in Judore as it is right now. I don't want to be involved in any more disputes. My father will come to visit me soon."

What does he want to prove by coming back with me? Does he want to be a key player in the return of a tragic schoolgirl? Make the Granzeuses indebted to him? If he wants to take me back, then he'll have to do something about Schneider himself!

"No, I insist, please come back. I'll guard and escort you. I'd like to hold an engagement party for you in Judore."

"Ha ha ha ha!" Several different dry laughs overlapped.

Who and who and who?! And shouldn't you not be laughing, Cecil?

The prince actually thought he could protect me... It was so ridiculous it was funny. And he'd pushed one of my buttons.

"Escort me?" I scoffed. I couldn't stop myself. Anger overtook me. *Escort me? Now? After you've left me alone all this time?*

Prince Gardner fell on his buttocks with a thud. All his attendants except Cecil rushed over to him. Cecil, who was still restrained, gazed at me with sparkling

eyes.

Lou stood up and rubbed his head against my leg to soothe me.

“Don’t you have someone other than me who you should be escorting?” I asked.

The prince hastily got back into his kneeling position.

“Someone else? But she...went to my brother...”

He was thinking of Maribelle, even now. *Isabella*... I grit my teeth.

Appraisal! He shone blue.

Gardner Judore (Second Prince of the Kingdom of Judore)

Status: Good

Skills: Fire magic, water magic, wind magic, earth magic

Blue! It hit me again that he didn’t have bad intentions. His status was normal too. Was he just lovesick and not under her spell? Or maybe Maribelle’s spell wouldn’t show up in the first place.

“I couldn’t stand letting a man who’s thinking of another woman escort me, Prince Gardner.”

“No, I don’t have anyone else anymore. Please, allow me to escort you.”

“I’ve always found it strange... What did you like about Maribelle? Don’t be surprised I know about her. I’m a noble lady. I’m privy to rumors.”

It was a rude question, but the prince was so intimidated by my anger, he had no choice but to answer honestly.

“I liked...that she was cute...how she had a childish streak...how she supported me...and how she hated fighting...”

“Lovely. None of those apply to me!”

“I...don’t understand why you’re so upset.”

“There are two reasons I won’t let you escort me. Do you believe all those

qualities you just spoke of are necessary for a statesman? I would think the exact opposite.”

“I’m the one who’s becoming a statesman! I just have to protect her!”

“Even though you’re weaker than me?”

“What did you...?!”

I was keeping the pressure up.

“Are you going to fall for Maribelle again if she comes back, despite your weakness?”

No response.

“What kind of future do you want for Judore?”

Totally speechless.

“I find us incompatible, Your Highness. Also, I’m rather fond of Isabella.”

“Isabella?”

“Any man who ignores his fiancée and won’t pay her the bare minimum amount of respect is an enemy to all women.”

“Oh...” His eyes shifted uncomfortably.

“Please allow me to say something, Your Imperial Majesty, Your Highness.”

Oh, Cecil? What is it? My anger briefly subsided at his sudden interjection.

“Your Highness, Serephione has been very interested in you since she was a student.”

“What?!” exclaimed everyone else as they all turned to look at me at once. I vigorously shook my head and hands to deny it.

“She wanted to know if it was okay for you to casually have tea with Maribelle during such an unpredictable era... Vassals won’t follow your lead unless you display effort, so she asked whether you were stronger than I am. I answered no. You would be no match for someone like me, who was trained by Serephione.”

“What?!”

I never said that! And I never trained you! I opened my eyes even wider and shook my head.

“Then she met Isabella at the Marcus Trade Company. She talked to Isabella about training to be the queen without revealing her identity. She encouraged Isabella, and she used her own money to have a dress made for her that would customarily have been given to her by her fiancé. She stood in for you to protect your position.”

“Serephione... You...?” Regueid looked at me.

“Th-That’s not how it went!”

All I did was design it! And my family paid for the dress! Wait, did they not receive that? Is it on my tab?! Nooo!

“Our empress is so unfathomable.”

Stop with the comments, Regueid! I can tell you’re laughing from that look in your eyes!

“Then she asked me, as someone she trusts, ‘Is Maribelle or Isabella more suitable to be queen?’ I answered confidently that the diligent and modest Isabella is. Maribelle...tried to use her charms on me, too, to be honest. Of course, I only have eyes for Serephione, so it didn’t work. In the end, her feelings shifted toward Prince Schneider. She’s a fickle person... Just as I had feared. When I said this to Serephione, she nodded deeply and then whispered something like, ‘Time to get ready.’ She predicted that there would be a rift in the kingdom all the way back then!”

“The conversation from before you kicked him in the head?! I’m impressed at how well he can pervert—ahem, invert himself...” Lou muttered. His jaw and mine were both dropped.

“Then she thought of the kingdom even while she was wounded, and she was concerned that she might become a source of conflict for you and the kingdom. All she wants is for Judore to have peace! Please understand Serephione’s feelings when all she can do is watch from outside the country!”

The curtain finally closed on Cecil’s grand delusional spectacle. *Why did you have to bring this pervert as one of your four attendants, prince?! The imperial*

palace was filled with bewilderment.

Drip, drip. A sound like small raindrops reached my ears. The floor in front of Prince Gardner was wet.

“P-Prince Gardner?”

He’s c-crying!

“I’m...ashamed...”

“Huh?”

“While you were thinking about the fate of the country, training, getting hurt, and dealing with all these concerns, I was just playing the game of love without a care... I thought I should enjoy my time as a student to the fullest that way...”

So, he was playing the game of love... Everyone from Galé had cold eyes.

“As for the future of Judore, I thought that if I became king, things would just naturally fall into place and we would be happy. I thought it was just expected that Isabella would study hard...”

How optimistic... I was jealous of his mindset.

“I came to take your power that my brother wanted for myself. Quite honestly, I didn’t grasp just how strong you are. My mom just told me that I could become king if I allied with you and Galé. I never thought about how I would lead the country if I became king...”

He was living in a world where things would be happily ever after once he became king. Was he reincarnated too?

“You were deeply wounded by my brother, and even knowing that I planned to use you, you still worried about Judore and dared to give me a harsh warning...”

“I see... She hardened her heart and put it harshly for the sake of her home nation...” Arthur said pensively.

Hey, Arthur! That’s not how it is! What’s with these earnest guys? And why is even Cecil crying?!

“I shall return to my country to think about the future of our country and

improve myself. I will listen to my brother's ideas, and if they are incompatible with my own, I will have to fight...but I hope you will help me then."

He was actually taking it to heart. He had always been an earnest person, even in the book. He was kind, genuine, and never looked back once he thought something was in the right. He had probably been swayed by Maribelle's pacifism and never considered anything else after that.

Gillain finally opened his mouth.

"What is in it for us to intervene in your war? No monarch would stick his neck out in a conflict where there is no gain. It will only cause unnecessary suffering to the people. I recommend that you act with caution for the sake of the people."

"I will take your advice to heart, Your Imperial Majesty."

"Also, the only person who will ever escort Serephione is me. I am extremely busy at the moment, so I can't go to Judore, and thus, neither can Serephione. And if you ever attack her or Galé, I won't hesitate to invade and conquer your kingdom. Understood?"

"Yes."

Prince Gardner's group left, and the remaining Galé side took a break in a private room next to the audience chamber.

"I felt like I'd wandered into some parallel world during that." I collapsed onto the desk.

"Parallel? You really attract the strangest people, Sere." Lou patted my head with his toe beans.

"What will happen to Judore?" I wondered.

"The emperor did a good job of inciting things. The prince is going to act; he'll be cautious, but he'll definitely make a move. The good-natured Prince Gardner has gone to discuss the matter, and I'm sure we'll see a skirmish break out soon. Ha ha!" Regueid crossed his feet elegantly as he drank his tea.

"Did I awaken a sense of justice in the puppet?" I asked.

“What Schneider has is a personal grudge. It’s not about justice. Now that Gardner has the ideal of making the country better, he’ll accept the challenge...for the greater good.” Asu smiled.

I made a big stir at that meeting... Was that the right thing to do? I stole a glance at Gillain, who was already looking at what appeared to be documents for his next task. Gillain nodded when he noticed my gaze.

For now, I’d just have to contact my father, brother, and the Trundles to inform them that the mountain had moved. The pervert had moved as well.

“Ahh, Judore produces such wonderful people! That should give me enough laughs to last the rest of my life! I never expected things to go so much like I thought! It almost makes me nervous, ha ha ha!”

I couldn’t find any words to respond to Regueid with... I felt like crying!

Somehow, we ended up deciding that I would train Prince Gardner before he and his companions went back to Judore. Naturally, the one who suggested it was his outrageous attendant Cecil.

“Your Highness, you just have to feel Serephione’s strength for yourself. It’ll awaken something new in you!”

You mean like a new kink?

We set up a meeting on the outskirts of the forest in the imperial domain. It was a public place where anyone could go.

Prince Gardner, Cecil, Lou, Arthur, and I were all there. We had the others stay back; I’d claimed that “This is top secret training,” but really, I was just being considerate so as few people as possible could see him fail. I wasn’t sure if he caught on to that...

“All right, Prince Gardner, you’re going to go about an hour in the four o’clock direction. There will be four devilboars there. Catch one and bring it back here.”

“What? Excuse me, are you saying that’s my training?”

“Yes, this is your first task.”

“How should I go to the location?”

“Um, however you like?”

“Then bring me a horse!”

Ah, jeez...

“Sorry, I should rephrase. Go there by yourself. I don’t care if you run, walk, jump, or skip. Ready, go!”

“W-Wait! Why do I have to run?”

“What are you going to do if Prince Schneider fights you somewhere that you can’t ride a horse? You’d have no choice but to use your own two legs!”

“I’m a magician. I haven’t done any physical training at all.”

“Then you’ll have to start now. Even battles of magic come down to physical stamina, you know. No matter what big moves you try to use, it’s over if you run out of energy. Do you think battles only last one or two hours?”

“But I’m a prince. I won’t be on the front lines. I doubt I could join the front lines even if I wanted to.”

“Well, Prince Schneider may try to fire up his own troops by shooting flames from his hands from the front lines, since public opinion has turned on him for attacking me. That would make for one prince fighting on the front lines and one prince who doesn’t even show his face. Which do you think the people would rather stand behind? Personally, I don’t care if you want to stop training, though.”

“Four o’clock, you said?”

The prince disappeared into the bushes with long strides.

Good grief.

“Arthur, go after him. We don’t want anything happening to him.”

“Understood. Would you mind if I participated in this training as well?”

Huh? Why? This is closer to bullying than training.

“I don’t mind, I guess... Do you want to go too, Cecil?”

“No, I don’t need to. I’ll wait here with you.”

Hmm, all right.

Arthur nodded and vanished into the forest. Cecil and I sat down on a log.

“So, you think you could catch a devilboar with ease, Cecil?”

“Lady Serephione—no, may I call you Miss, like the guildmaster does? Take a look at this.”

“Oh?” Lou’s eyes sparkled.

Cecil took a plate from his neck. It was bronze...from Trundle.

“You’re not in Macgregor Guild?” I asked.

Cecil smiled sheepishly. “I’m ashamed to say it, but I have a platinum plate with Macgregor.”

“So, why the bronze?”

“Alma brought me to Trundle Guild. I saw her work there. It was on a completely different level...both the commission and how strong she was...”

Alma...

“I joined Trundle Guild as well and finally made it to C-rank, so I think I could handle up to three devilboars at once. Several of my classmates have also been initiated into Trundle.”

There was no way Ziek would hand out a bronze Trundle plate easily. Cecil wasn’t just a spoiled noble boy anymore.

“Why did you come with Prince Gardner?”

“Well, I really do like Prince Gardner, at the end of the day. He’s noble, diligent, and kind to a fault. And...it touched me how sad he was after he lost Maribelle.”

That’s just like Cecil. He may not have any political motives, but he doesn’t have any hesitation or regrets either.

“How much do you...? How much do Alma and everyone at school know about what’s going on?”

“Powerless as I was, I didn’t hear anything at first. Alma and Nick saw you

running away while being attacked by magicians, so they ran into the gym after the following explosion, and they saw Mr. Kodak hurt badly and the general standing there stunned. There was a huge commotion about it, but the school never gave us an explanation.”

So they were concerned enough about me to come to the gym.

“I heard the whole story after I was accepted as a Trundle member. Trundle Guild guards information about you very strictly. They told me that you had been targeted for your power from a young age, and that Prince Schneider lured you to him using the general because he wanted your power, and that he tried to kill you when you refused him.”

My beloved scary-cool gang accepted Cecil as one of them... He's the real thing.

“When word came after a while that you were alive in Marsche, everyone in the guild cried.”

Everyone...

“Then, they gave me the confidential news that the emperor of Galé had taken you back to his country after you were attacked by bandits, and that you two were so lovey-dovey kissy-kissy that no one could possibly interfere.”

“Hey, that last part was weird!”

“Oh, sorry. I picked that up from my favorite book, the Four Knight Sisters.”

What the heck?

“How many people know as much as you do?”

“Me, Nick, Alma, and Trundle Guild. And then the royal family, as well as probably the shrine Saint Elise is at. The students at knight school are sharing information too... They've probably reached something close to the truth, especially those of us in the same year as you.”

Us? “I'm still...in your year?”

“Of course!”

It may have been the right choice not to kill Cecil...even if he's a pervert. I put

my hand in my pocket, took out the glass piece Nick made for me and stroked its surface as I held it up to the light filtering through the trees.

“Speaking of the shrine, have you heard? Saint Elise apparently formed a contract with the legendary heavenly beast of the east! I always knew she’d be someone special!”

Lou and I met eyes.

“She probably changed the story up a little,” Lou said. “So that you’re not targeted even more than you are now.”

Thanks, Elise... “Does Terl know that I made a contract with Miyu?” I asked Lou when Cecil looked away for a moment.

“Don’t worry. Usually, we four heavenly beasts would share information, but it’s impossible in the state he’s in. I don’t know what’s going on with Terl either.”

“Will Elise be in danger from misrepresenting herself as a contractor?”

“Elise is rather strong herself. And Kilama owes her, in a way. Miyu and Renza will protect her.”

Okay, so Elise has something like Miyu’s divine protection. Miyu kissed her too. They’re not contracted, but they’re like kindred spirits since they shared that mystical moment together.

“What would you do if your beloved Prince Gardner tried to use me?” I asked Cecil. “You would turn against me, right?”

“My sublime goddess Serephione would never be used, so that’s nothing to worry about.”

“Correct,” said Lou. “I see people can grow a lot in two years...”

“Could you give a letter to Alma for me?”

“A request from our Lady Serephione... What an unexpected joy!”

He hadn’t changed in some ways, at least. Realizing that put me at ease...even though he was a pervert.

While I waited for the prince to return, I took some stationery out of my

Magic Room and wrote some letters to Alma. In the meantime, Cecil did sit-ups and push-ups. The meathead mentality was definitely Trundle...

“They’re back.”

A few seconds after Lou had pointed it out, they touched my barrier.

I looked over to the rustling noise to see Arthur, looking unruffled without even a crease in his clothes and holding a jumbo devilboar in his right hand, accompanied by Prince Gardner, whose clothes were torn to shreds and soaked in blood as he carried in a baby devilboar tied to his back with a rope. He came up to me, pale in the face, and collapsed onto the ground.

Cecil looked disappointed. “Your Highness, you shouldn’t be hunting animals that are still this small...”

Cecil got it. That would warrant punishment with Trundle.

“Did you...say something...?”

But the prince wasn’t in Trundle, so I decided to overlook it.

“Teach him how to dress it, Cecil. And no helping him.”

“Certainly!”

“Dress it? Me? Why?” the prince asked.

“You love thigh meat simmered in red wine, don’t you?”

“How do you know that?”

I was a contender to be your wife once upon a time. “This is what that’s made of. It can’t hurt to learn how the things you put in your mouth are made.”

The prince fearfully took the knife Cecil handed to him. Copying Cecil, he stuck it into the boar, and blood gushed out.

“A-Ahhh!”

By the time the sun had set, the prince’s catch had finally become meat. It was Arthur’s first time dressing an animal, too, but he didn’t make as much of a fuss as the prince. The scent of beasts and blood wafted around the area.

It was a nice sight—the prince was splattered with devilboar blood from his blond hair to his toes, with blood almost seeming to seep into the skin of his hands. The usually stylish and sparkling prince was a complete mess... I felt a dark kind of joy.

This is no good... The prince from this world has nothing to do with the one I knew...

“Sere...” muttered Lou.

“Prince Gardner, Arthur, good work today. The training is now over.”

“Huh?”

“This is fresh, delicious meat! Share it with someone special.”

“W-Wait! I want to know the goal of this training.”

“Independence. And experiencing getting dirty for yourself, I suppose.”

“Basically...the people and soldiers get bloody every day for the sake of the prince, right?” Cecil opened his eyes wide.

“You have blood on your hands!” echoed Cecil’s voice from the book in my heart. Now that I thought about it, the plot had really changed quite a bit.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget the scent of this blood...” Prince Gardner stared at his own two hands.

“How thoughtful of you...” Arthur looked at me admiringly.

Arthur seemed to be having an emotional moment, but I disregarded him and cast a quick cleansing spell on the dirtied forest. “All right, let’s head back!”

“Wait!” Cecil said suddenly. “He still hasn’t been given the all-important enlightenment ritual!”

“Huh? Cecil, what are you talking about?”

“The prince will still be hesitant until you do it! Please!”

“Does he mean...?” Lou covered his head with his paws and shook like a leaf!

Is Lou traumatized?!

“Please, Lady Serephione! I want to experience this secret technique of yours

and be born anew!”

“Y-Your Highness! Please stand up!”

“Keep that posture, Your Highness,” Cecil insisted. “Okay, Miss, go for the jump!”

“Wait, Cecil! I don’t want to be guilty of disrespecting royalty all over again!”

“I’m asking for this! Of course it’s not disrespect!”

“Wait one second! If you have such a secret technique, I want it too! Give me the strength to protect you and His Imperial Majesty!”

“It’s not like that, Arthur! Can everyone stop kneeling?! Lou!”

Lou sighed. “Whatever, I guess it’s no big deal. Go for it!”

On the outskirts of the Galea forest, I sank my heel into the heads of two young men. They didn’t regain consciousness until the next morning...



The civil war had finally begun in Judore. According to a letter from Ziek, as soon as Gardner returned to Judore, Schneider accused him of undermining the country’s interests through his contact with Galé and claimed he was trying to turn Judore into a vassal state like Marsche. Gardner objected and protested, of course, but the discussion broke down.

While Gardner was wondering whether to make the first move or to wait for the other side, his retainer set fire to Schneider’s palace, igniting the flames of war. Of course, Schneider was not injured by this attack.

On Gardner’s side were the queen, the reformist nobles who were benefiting from the current regime, and the magician’s association. On Schneider’s side were a part of the magician’s association that was fascinated by his powerful magic, the army that wasn’t amused by the magician’s association, and Maribelle.

They all gathered together and clashed.

Gardner called for the capital to be evacuated, and there had been no civilian casualties yet, but Schneider set fires to the residences of people who had a

record of trying to kill him and his mother, and the fires were spreading.

I wasn't worried about our family's home in the capital or the Trundle residence, since they had iron walls. But...what about Mrs. Marcus? The Palpal Cafe where Alma and I had tea together? And what about Duncan?

Dumb Schneider!

Gardner's overwhelming numbers and money against Schneider's overwhelming power and Terl—the two were surprisingly competitive. Magician's association buildings and military bases were being ambushed, starting battles. The war had only been going on for a few days, but those without power were being defeated, and just as we had predicted, each side was losing numbers.

I felt guilty for just watching from on high. I wished the two would just fight it out man-to-man, but that was impossible. Gardner was too weak; the queen wouldn't allow it.

"Sere, when do we join the fight?" Lou asked.

"When someone important to me gets hurt."

I didn't have a plot in mind, but it was inevitable that as long as my family and friends were in Judore, someone would get involved. When that happened, I would methodically crush everyone who hurt someone I cared about. And after that would be Schneider and Maribelle.

"You told him that you would only fight to protect someone you love, after all."

I remembered our battle to the death and wondered how much stronger Schneider had gotten.

"I hear he's mowing down his enemies with fire," Lou said.

"I guess he doesn't think it's worth showing off his ice magic... Just like me in my past life..."

I wondered how he felt after getting his own hands dirty. Regardless, the capital was aflame at the same time as the plot.

"This letter doesn't say anything about Maribelle," Lou noted.

“She’s not important to Ziek. I’ll ask him to tell me about her.”

I wrote a letter of thanks to Ziek, as well as one to my grandmother.

I wanted to hear my grandmother’s opinion as a renowned soldier, but she hadn’t been responding to my letters. I’d just heard from other people that she was furious. *Why isn’t she writing back? Is it because of how much weight her words hold as the head of the Trundle family? Should I think of it as her exercising extreme caution?*

I was certain that she was healthy because I had wished for it one Tanabata. My grandmother was strong. But just because she was strong didn’t mean she wasn’t lonely. I understood that from my past life as a thirty-something woman. I continued to write her affectionate letters...

“Sere, I’m hungry.”

“Okay!”

“Sere, is it time for dinner?”

“You’re not doing a good job of asking subtly, Asu.”

“Sere.”

“Oh, Gillain! You’re home early. Sit down! I made a rice bowl with Marsche-style salmon and fish eggs. I caught a salmon before it went upstream as part of the Galea Guild’s marine survey request!”

“You have many talents...”

“Well, she has the ruler of the eastern sea behind her.”

“You too, Sakaki, Arthur.”

“Ooh, Marsche-style salmon roe! This is in season!”

“I had some of Yoko’s Secret All-Purpose Dashi/Soy Sauce imported, so I can promise this will taste great.”

“I can’t believe I get to enjoy Lady Serephione’s cooking...”

“Do you like it, Gillain?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“Because it’s full of Sere’s love.”

“H-Hey, Asu, stop with the commentary!”

“Aw, don’t be embarrassed!”

“Lou!”

“Ha ha, this tastes great. You’re lucky to have a diligent wife, Gillain.”

“Sere... Thanks.”

“Of course.”

That night, the Trundle residence in the capital was ambushed and burned.

Chapter 3: Return to Trundle

Magical transmissions came flying in from my father, brother, Enrique, and Elise informing me about what happened to the Trundle residence.

Knowing this, there was a chance that the Granzeuses could be targeted. It would be best to have my father and brother guard the mansion in the capital and our domain. I told them I was on my way to Trundle.

I sent a blue butterfly to Gillain, and he came running to the Twilight Palace within a few minutes. The date was about to change.

“I’m leaving, Gillain.”

“Are you packed?”

“Always.”

My Magic Room (Living Alone) was always so prepared, it was almost sad.

“Take Asu with you.”

“But...”

“Sere!”

“Okay... Thank you.”

“I’ll come as soon as I can.”

“You can wait until we understand the situation better. I have Miyu this time. I want to call Miyu, Lou. What should I do? I’ll need to use a new kind of magic I made with her. Should I not, since she’s in training?”

“No training can take precedence over her contractor. And the swamp in Trundle territory is holy ground to Miyu. Her homing instinct can take her right back. I’ll contact her now.”

“Wait! Tell her to come hidden. It’d be best to not have our enemies aware of Miyu’s existence until the last minute.”

“All right, Miyu is on Regan Island. She was a candidate for the successor

there, after all. Let's go in secret." Lou shone bright and grew to his full size. I turned to look at Gillain before I got on Lou's back, and he wrapped me in his arms.

"Make sure you call me this time. I'm in a position where Galé and I can act at short notice for you."

"Yeah, I'll make sure to contact you."

Gillain's powerful magic surrounded my body, and he kissed me casually. We had only kissed a few times, but letting him kiss me felt natural. I wrapped my arms around his neck and gently sent my magic into him. There was no guarantee that we would even see each other again, so I had no time to feel embarrassed. I put my heart into it, wishing him peace in my absence. His embrace grew tighter, maybe because he sensed it.

Gillain traced my cheek, reluctant to part, and rested his forehead against mine. "Don't forget, I'm not whole without you."

"I know. I'll take care of myself. Make sure you eat the cake I made for you."

Gillain took off his jet-black cape and wrapped me in it over my dark brown shirt, black pants, and black boots to blend into the night. It nearly touched the floor. He clipped it shut at my neck so it wouldn't slip off. His fingers slid down my collarbone and lifted my plate up, which he kissed. It shone blue, like it had in the past.

"If only I could just hide you in my arms..." he muttered quietly. I couldn't say anything back.

Asu spread his rainbow wings and flew off into the twilight.

The Trundles would never allow an attack. That meant something had happened to my grandmother.

"Let's go."

I parted from Gillain and mounted Lou. We headed north, my hair that I hadn't had time to tie back fluttering behind me.

We arrived soundlessly in the deep of night. Asu was waiting for us there. The

Trundle house that I'd known since childhood was half burned to the ground. I tried to stop the tears from welling up in my eyes.

"Miss!" One of my grandmother's spies suddenly appeared before me and knelt down.

"Take me to my grandmother."

There was a hidden room in the basement of the storage room behind the mansion. In it was my grandmother's retainer Orcus and two members of his entourage, who looked at me and bowed their heads, their faces contorted in frustration.

"Erza..." Lou's words sank into the darkness.

I couldn't speak. Lying on the sofa, my grandmother's eyes were sunken and hollow, and her beautiful chestnut hair had turned white...

She was alive! But she was suffering, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Miss!"

"Ziek! What's going on?! Why didn't you tell me anything?!" I shouted at Ziek, who was kneeling next to my grandmother, holding her hand.

"The head of the Trundle family...can't show weakness..." Ziek said through a tearful smile, lovingly stroking her head.

"I... I want a short explanation."

"When you left, Erza was of course sad, but she believed that you were well and protected the Trundle domain all the more fiercely. She danced for joy with me when the saint came and gave her definite information. Shortly after that...something happened. She suddenly stopped showing up in public, her orders came through underlings, and I wasn't able to meet with her when I stopped by. When I finally kicked the guards aside to deliver your letters to her, I found her in this state. I tried to call a doctor, but she pulled a knife and asked if I wanted to expose Trundle to danger."

I was speechless.

"I don't know where the information got out, but we were targeted, and that's why we're here today."

“But what will we do without our leader?!”

“Half a day before the fire here, hailstorms fell all over the northern part of Trundle. The hail was pebble-sized and quite large, causing extensive damage to livestock and crops. Half of the force was allocated to that area. They went so far as to manipulate the weather, making hailstorms so widespread, all to slightly thin out our defenses here.”

Terl...

“She’s cursed, Sere.” Lou scrutinized her.

Appraisal! She shone blue.

Erza Trundle (Head of the Trundle family, soldier, S-rank adventurer, servant of Loudarylphena and Serephone)

Status: Cursed, weakened

Skills: Intuition, short lance, poison resistance, determination, wisdom, guardian

Cursed...? She’s not sick or hurt. Had my charm not protected her because her body was healthy?

“Sere, put up a defense on the building!” Asu urged me.

Stunned, I put up soundproofing magic, sightproofing magic, perception disruption magic—I used every kind of concealment magic I could think of. This place had just been targeted by enemies. As soon as Lou and Asu confirmed that the magic was in effect, they released their illusions. Miyu appeared at the same time, along with the lesser dragon. Miyu’s azure hue had become stronger and more beautiful, and she was sitting on papa dragon’s head in her familiar pocket size.

With the appearance of the three holy beasts, the stagnant, scorched space was at once purified and enveloped in an atmosphere so holy it almost hurt.

“How...?” Ziek and everyone nearby drew in breaths. They could all see the holy beasts, as expected of Trundle. “Miss...Erza... So these are who Erza

wanted to protect with her life...”

I rushed over to heal my grandmother, but Asu interrupted me.

“Wait, I have to find who did this first! I need a second...”

He closed his eyes. Miyu and the lesser dragon gazed at my grandmother.

“Who set the fire? And on whose orders?”

One of my grandmother’s associates answered quietly. “We’ve captured six magicians, but we put them to sleep so they don’t kill themselves.”

“I’ll go, Sere. I can see through lies,” Lou said.

We were about to go to the attackers, led by one of the people there, when Miyu suddenly began to shake. Lou and I stopped in our tracks.

“W-Waaaah!” Miyu cried.

“Miyu, what’s wrong?” I asked.

“This is...my curse...”

“What do you mean?” Lou asked.

Miyu spoke slowly as she looked at my grandmother. “You were attacked by so many assassins when we traveled together, Miss Sere. But you never let me kill them after we captured them. I got frustrated and cursed them to suffer forever.”

“You...did?”

“Now that curse is on our master, for some reason... My curse...on our forest’s...kind protector... Why...?”

“Did somebody reverse engineer the curse from one of the assassins after they returned...?” Lou wondered aloud.

“Is that possible, Asu?”

“Nobody could do that, unless they were a very irregular being.”

Lou growled. *Someone with cheat abilities...*

“Miyu, lesser dragon, you know curses best. Find the source...and retaliate!” Lou ordered sternly.

“Yes!” Miyu shone, grew to a size smaller than the lesser dragon, and began analyzing the curse with a determined look.

I traded places with Ziek, kissed my grandmother’s cheeks and forehead over and over, and held her head.

“I’m sorry, grandmother... I’m sorry...”

Her mouth moved. She was saying something. I put my ear close.

“Ah... Liruphi... Why...?”

Liruphi? Liruphione? My mother’s name?

“Miyu, what do you mean that they suffer forever?”

“They have a nightmare that never ends... They relive the most painful things that ever happened to them over and over...” Miyu’s face contorted in sadness.

My grandmother was reliving the time my mother died over and over in her dreams... Of course she couldn’t sleep...

“It’s her!” growled the lesser dragon.

“You found them?” Lou asked.

“It’s that little girl who tried to kill me before you two came to help!”

Maribelle...

“Send it back to her even stronger!” Lou commanded. “And Miyu, you’re now the heavenly beast of the east. Use a spell on her that will keep her from ever doing something as foolish as stealing our spells again. Make her pay for what she did.”

“Okay.” Miyu’s eyes glinted through her tears, and she approached my grandmother. The lesser dragon followed behind her. They synchronized their breathing, opened their eyes wide, and bathed my grandmother in their magic.

A lot of black stuff came out of my grandmother’s body, and it all coalesced into a single pitch-black ball on her stomach. Miyu muttered something angrily to the ball and exhaled. The ball turned so black that it was completely opaque.

“She’ll regret ever using me. Go!”

The ball vanished.

Asu climbed onto my grandmother's chest and let a tear fall onto her mouth. It soaked into her dry lips.

"You don't mind, Asu? Thank you..."

"It's our fault in a way, since Miyu wasn't careful. And Erza is your irreplaceable mother figure, isn't she?"

I nodded.

"You fool!" the lesser dragon roared. "Why did you go against what Serephione told you?! And don't tell me you thought it was for the best! I told you that curses are double-edged swords! Your carelessness has made Serephione and the master in charge of guarding all creatures in Trundle suffer!" The lesser dragon smacked his daughter, the heavenly beast, with his tail.

"Father... I'm sorry..."

"D-Don't be angry at her! I couldn't have lived in Marsche without Miyu!"

It wasn't Miyu's fault. It was mine for not being able to give the order to kill the assassins. Actually, no, it was one hundred percent Maribelle's fault.

"That's enough," Lou said. "Miyu did her best to protect Sere while I was away. And she's going to do better in the future. Right, Miyu?"

"Y-Yes!"

"You two are too easy on Miyu..." The lesser dragon continued to lecture his daughter, but I turned my attention to my grandmother. Thanks to Asu, the color had returned to her face slightly.

"Liru... Liruphi..."

"I'm here, mother," I played along. "Rest well."

"Liruphi... But I have to protect...your treasure...my treasure...Serephi..."

Grandmother... I bit my lip. This wasn't the time to cry. I resolved myself.

"Mother, I'll take on the responsibility for protecting everything that you've protected."

I'll protect my grandmother from now on.

The crease between her eyebrows finally softened...her grimace relaxed...and she fell asleep. I kissed her eyelids as a charm. She smiled slightly.

I draped my favorite fluffy blanket over her...and picked up the black sword that always stayed with the head of the Trundle family.

Ziek watched me with a mystified expression.

I stood up and drew my black sword, a sword that will never break, said to have been forged by my distant ancestors themselves.

"I hereby declare myself, Serephione Granzeus, the head of the Trundle family. Although I do not bear the name of Trundle, I am a direct descendant of Geintz and Erza Trundle. I vow to cherish the land that bears their name and guard it with my sword, as my ancestors have. And I consider the act of harming my beloved ancestors and attacking their lands as a declaration of war. From now on, Trundle shall be ready for battle. We will not tolerate any intruders."

Lou and Miyu stood tall on either side of me. Asu spread his wings wide and jumped onto my left shoulder.

Guildmaster Ziek, Orcus, and all of my grandmother's associates knelt down. Even the lesser dragon hung his head.

"Our lives for our new master, Serephione."

The sun began to rise.

I left my grandmother in the care of her loving entourage and rode on Lou through the morning dew-soaked grass to my old home, Trundle Guild. Asu took off as well, probably to report to Gillain. Galé was close to Judore, unlike Marsche, so he would be back soon enough.

The main guild members who I had missed were all there. The most accomplished adventurers in Trundle, and the senior leaders who were known in every part of the world... To me, they were like doting grandparents.

"Serephi... Welcome back... I'm so sorry I wasn't able to protect Lady Erza..."

Tears streamed down Ms. Lara's face. I shook my head.

“Miss—I mean, Master... That’ll take some getting used to. Welcome back, though!”

“It makes me sound old to be called ‘Master!’ Just talk to me like you always have.”

I would only be the master of Trundle’s territory temporarily. I planned to give the title right back to my grandmother when she was back in business. I knew she would get better! That would be after the war, though. I had to keep that part to myself since it could affect morale.

“I see... You did well, Miss.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kodak...” I wrapped my arms around my teacher’s large torso, and he ruffled my hair.

“I’m sorry, Miss...”

“Why are you apologizing, Gil?”

As I spoke with an exhausted-looking Gilbert, the guildmaster gave me the seat at the head of the table. Lou sat at my feet, and Miyu was tucked in my front shirt pocket. They were both concealed well with illusion magic. There were most likely people here with the skill to see them, and I wasn’t in the mood to explain about being contracted and what not.

“Everyone is here, Miss. To cut right to the chase, what do you think of the attack on our former master Erza?”

“First of all, the perpetrator of last night’s attack confessed that they’re on Schneider’s side,” I explained.

The people before me were frozen in fear. Even if they couldn’t see Lou, they had no choice but to obey him based on their animal instincts when faced with his intimidation. It was just like when Terl had glared at me before.

“I wanted them to fight it out at the top and get this civil war over with. But I didn’t realize until my grandmother was attacked that Schneider had the same idea. The only thing is, it wasn’t Gardner that he saw as his greatest threat. It was my grandmother.”

The seniors’ eyes glinted. The faces of everyone in my grandmother’s

generation that had fought alongside her were stern and trembling in anger.

“Trundle currently has more forces than the army. Its head was the commander of a hundred battles. That made Trundle the strongest force that didn’t follow Schneider’s will. He must have learned how frightening and influential we are in the past two years. Even if he were to kill Gardner and become next in line for the throne, Trundle would eventually stand against him. However, no matter how strong we are, we would collapse if our head was taken down. I think his plan was to kill my grandmother to have that peace of mind and then crush Gardner. After he happened to obtain the ability to curse her, he attacked.”

I laid it all out at once as I surveyed everyone. Ziek nodded with his eyes closed. *Does that mean my idea got a passing score?*

“Honestly, I don’t think I’d have been able to lead as well as I have been without my grandmother. We were on the verge of defeat, in a way. With my grandmother and Trundle out of the way, Schneider could have had the leverage to try to make Gardner and the queen surrender.”

“Lady Erza’s willpower saved us all...” muttered Lara. That was an undeniable fact.

“Also, it’s me that Schneider personally wants to keep down. My grandmother has an immeasurable amount of influence over me.”

If my grandmother had died, I would have been left unable to move out of anger and regret. Many of the people of Trundle would have felt the same, and it would have turned into a messy fight amid the chaos.

“Larouza, Serephione, never forget...”

“Don’t overestimate your own strength. Gather accurate intel on your enemies. Always be alert. Ask for advice.”

“There’s nothing wiser than always presupposing the worst-case scenario is true. You can’t afford to be optimistic, Serephi. If you assume he knows, it’ll make you more cautious.”

“Just as you will protect me...I, too, will protect you and the holy beast Lou to the extent of my ability. I offer you my loyalty, my life, my everything.”

“We’re going to crush them thoroughly, cautiously, and coolly. Schneider is strong, after all! We can’t afford to take him lightly. Contact all chains of command. Have them infiltrate Schneider’s strongholds. We’ll cut off their supply chain first to filter out the unmotivated pawns before we enter the battle.” Ziek gave instructions to the young men behind him.

“A curse, though... Not even Lady Erza could know, right? It’s foul play. If not for that trick, we’d still be in business as usual. They’re just going to invisibly plot against us and take us down like that, right? What are we gonna do?” Matt clutched his mohawked head. A gold plate peeked out from his chest. *Wow!*

“We returned the curse, so whoever did it can’t use the same trick again,” I replied. “They may think up a different curse, though.” *No optimism allowed!* “I’ll ask the lesser dragon of the swamp to be our curse detector.”

Miyu’s existence was a secret, but in her tiny snake days, everyone had doted on her after they were done being startled. This was Miyu’s hometown, so I wouldn’t stop her from showing herself if she wanted. The lesser dragon, however, was the lord of the swamp and an object of respect for the people of Trundle. Everyone could see him, so there was no problem talking about him.

“The lesser dragon... That’s the god with the golden shed skin!” Lara perked up a bit.

“That Schneider picked the wrong guys to mess with...” muttered Kodak with a chilling expression. He had been beaten by Schneider once before, just like I had. I knew neither of us planned to let him get away with it.

“At noon, we will announce Serephione’s new status as the master of Trundle to the royal family, all nobles, the lords of all domains, and all guilds. We will also report that Trundle was attacked last night and that we intend to retaliate against the attackers as a matter of justice. The guilds will destroy Schneider’s supplies and military arsenal in no time. Tell everyone to get ready!”

Everyone outside of the guild stood up, bowed silently, and left.

“Aren’t you all mad that a junior like me would take the title of master?” I asked Ziek quietly.

“Ha ha! Isn’t it a bit late to worry about that? It’s only natural that you would

be our master. Anything that you lack due to youth, we'll just have to hammer it into you!"

C-Can't you just fill in for what I lack?

"Maribelle is the girl from that one time, though, isn't she? I remember you being concerned about her... Now she's targeting us again... We should have killed her." Ziek had no intention of hiding his true feelings. I could see a tornado swirling behind him.

"Maribelle is an unpredictable factor. She learned how to use curses suddenly, and she could surprise us like that again. Don't underestimate her or Schneider."

"As you wish."

"Guildmaster Ziek... I'm sorry about last night." I lowered my head, and Ziek shook his.

"We didn't realize it was a curse... Geintz would have cursed us to death himself for that if he were here. I'm glad you're back now... I'm so glad you made it in time." Ziek's wrinkled, calloused palms wrapped around my hands. They were warm.

"So, you'll be communicating with the guilds, but I want to ask for ideas from my grandmother's underlings and spies. I want to get in touch with them as soon as I can. Should I go through Orcus?"

Ziek grinned. "Normally, there would be no issue with Orcus, but I doubt he wants to leave Erza's side for even a second right now. I know the perfect person to contact. Let's call her right away."

"Serephi!"

"S-Sasara!"

I dashed directly toward Sasara, who looked like a gerbera daisy with eyes as bright red as the sun!

She looked like she'd be the top star for male roles at an all-female theater troupe. Her dark red military uniform toned down her femininity and gave a

cool impression. Her shiny blonde curls rested just above her shoulders, and her smile was warm and handsome. *How am I not supposed to fall for her?!*

I looked at the cuff of her jacket to see an M embroidered on it in beautiful writing. It was a Marcus Trade Company exclusive! *Good work, Mrs. Marcus!*

However, her uniform was that of the national army, of which many members had gone over to Schneider's side. *This doesn't make sense. Sorry, Sasara.*

Appraisal! She shone blue.

Sasara (Saint, loyal subject of Erza, second lieutenant in the Judoran Army, Sere-Alma fan club member)

Status: Healthy, furious

Skills: Destroyer of evil, healing magic, mercy, one-handed sword, secrecy, poison resistance

"Saint..." whispered Lou, Miyu, and I in wonder. *We've discovered the real thing...*

"Serephi, I've been assigned to the recon team of the military, but I'm on Trundle's side through and through! Lady Erza raised me to be a spy."

Sasara explained it perfectly! She was only in the military to spy on them. The military itself had even placed her in its spy division. I had no choice but to leave the sexy spy lady role to Sasara.

"Her heart is just as lovely as Elise's, so it's all good with me!" Miyu chirped.

"Saint..." Lou mused. "Well, she doesn't realize it herself, so that's good in my book. As for the healing magic, why don't we try drawing it out of her when we get the chance, like we did with Elise?"

"Good idea."

She'll probably carry out her saintly duties more effectively if she doesn't know it herself! And she's like twins with Elise, so does that make them a matching set of saints?! But a saint as a spy...will that work?

“What does ‘destroyer of evil’ mean?”

“She has no tolerance for wickedness. It’s a power similar to ours,” Lou answered.

That makes sense for the pure Sasara. And Sere-Alma Club? What even is that?

I stealthily reapplied the lightning magic on Sasara’s ring. There was no sign that it had been used. *Thank goodness.*

“Thank you for supporting my grandmother. What did her direct reports have to say?”

“Lady Erza predicted every possible situation. All we have to do is act according to her emergency manual. In the event that we can’t communicate with her, it says we are to follow orders from Serephione, then Larouza, then the guildmaster in that order. Nobody objects to this, of course. I will be responsible for communicating between our commanding officer and, uh...Master Serephi.”

I felt better knowing Sasara was in charge.

“Thank you. Let’s get right to it, then. Secure all of Trundle territory so that nobody can step inside. Guard my grandmother especially well. As soon as we receive defensive support from the Granzeus domain, we’ll team up with the guilds and start crushing their units, starting with the smallest ones. Make sure even minor reports get to me quickly. And if you have a chart of the detailed strength and deployment of the troops, please give me a copy.”

“Understood. How will we finish the fight off?”

“I don’t want to prolong it. I’ll come out as soon as Schneider is feeling the heat. That’s a master’s job. He’s far stronger than I am, so you all will have to stand by. Don’t take a shot at him, even by mistake. Save your stamina and replenish your supplies.”

I looked at both Ziek and Sasara.

“This is the time to show our solidarity as Trundles! Let’s get to it!”

“Yes!”



Trundle soldiers and adventurers were fundamentally not interested in enemies weaker than themselves. If someone offered their weapons up in surrender to a Trundle soldier, they would simply be told never to oppose Trundle again and be left alone. The soldier would then run off in search of an opponent stronger than them.

As we stormed the military bases, the enemy soldiers felt the fear of Trundle and told us, “We were only on Prince Schneider’s side to fight Prince Gardner. We have no intention of making an enemy of Trundle...” then they ran away. They were such a hodgepodge group, I almost felt bad for Schneider.

Apparently, the queen requested a visit despite the state of affairs. I had Orcus write something like “We’re in a war! Don’t act so nonchalant!” in a polite way and send it to her. It was the royal family’s failure to raise the princes with a good brotherly relationship that led to the birth of that vengeful demon in the first place, which ticked me off even more.

No, I have to stay cool and serious, like grandmother taught me.

We had to have a group led by Matt infiltrate Schneider’s palace as retaliation for burning the Trundle mansion. We’d finally made it to the starting line. As we were considering contingencies and discussing routes and methods at the guild, someone set a hot cup of tea on the table in front of me.

“Thank you very mu—Alma!”

“Serephi!”

It was Alma! Her hair was now down to her shoulders, and she’d gained a good amount of muscle since I’d last seen her, but she still looked slender, maybe thanks to her bone structure. I was feeling antsy after seeing her again after all this time, so the other guild members were considerate enough to take a break. We nervously went over to the table we had always sat at.

“How’s Lady Erza?”

“She’s fine! She’s getting better quickly, and I’m protecting her! Don’t worry!”

“That’s great to hear... Are you okay, Serephi?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you were all alone overseas, weren’t you...? I would have cried if it were me.” Alma looked genuinely near tears. Seeing her like that...it felt like I had permission not to hold back.

“Yeah, I did cry. I was lonely, and I missed you, and I wanted to go back to school.”

“Serephi...”

Alma and I hugged and comforted each other.

“I cried too. I was safe and sound at school, but I was so, so lonely without you.”

Even at sixteen, Alma’s heart was still that of a pure girl. We cried a bit...then giggled and perked back up.

“The guild decided that we, as students, are not allowed to fight. Since Trundle’s shorthanded now, I’ve just been doing as many of the usual commissions as I can. I want to think that’s helping Trundle. But I’m still so weak... I want you to train me, please! So I can join the forces as soon as I graduate and not be a dead weight! Oh, and I heard you can use magic! I was so surprised!”

“Oh... I’m sorry for keeping it from you. I just really, really wanted to go to knight school.”

“That makes sense... And we wouldn’t have met if you hadn’t hidden it, right? So I’m glad you did! Teach me some magic when this is all over! I want something to kick Cecil’s butt with!”

She didn’t blame me for keeping a secret from the school... *Thank you, Alma.*

“Alma, I want to ask you about something too!”

“Oh! What is it?”

“How has Nick been for the past two years?”

“You’re asking now?! Ahhh, he’s coming in soon! What do I say...?” Alma went as red as a boiled octopus. *I see you two have something going on...!*

The door opened, and a breeze blew through.

“Whew, I’m back! I burned all the crops damaged by the hail! I’m beat! Wait —”

A man smelling of gunpowder came in through the front door of the guild. He had the same bright orange hair that had always given me hope. He was the person who had never looked down on me or put me on a pedestal, but accepted me as an equal from the beginning—my best friend.

“Nick! Welcome back!”

“Serephi...”

Nick had reached 190 centimeters and looked like the other men of Trundle now. His usual sword, looking beat-up again, fell from his hand and clattered onto the floor. Tears suddenly welled up in his dark brown eyes.

I pushed my chair back and ran to the tearful Nick, then clung to him. I reached up and wiped his warm tears away with a finger. Even I couldn’t help but cry, seeing Nick like this...

Nick looked at me from above and wiped my own tears away with the rough thumb of a hardworking man.

“Serephi... I’m so sorry! I wasn’t able to be any use to you...” His teardrops fell onto my forehead. “I’m sorry... I wasn’t able to help you as a friend...when you got kidnapped... I’m so sorry...”

Nick didn’t get it at all. He was the first person to befriend me. He’d been my friend all this time. He still called me a friend even now. He was too stupid to understand how much that in itself had helped me and supported me.

“Nick... I’m strong, you know!”

“Yeah, I know! But what does that have to do with this?”

Nick became my friend without knowing my background, just by fighting me. He called me—a noble lady, the master of the Trundle family, and a future empress—his friend, and even more, he was crying that he wasn’t able to help me. He was just a kind friend, without any strings attached, who treated me as just Serephione.

“You’re my best friend...the first I’d ever made...” he sobbed.

That’s why I can count on you!

“You’re right!” I cried. “Nick, make really sure you save me next time!”

I took my treasure out of my pocket and pressed it into Nick’s hand. His face contorted when he saw the silver-flecked glass.

“Yeah... Yeah, I’ll do what I can! I’m gonna...get stronger...” he sniffled.

Alma wrapped her arms around both me and Nick from behind and quietly cried. Just then...

“Hey, let me in too, you idiots!”

Mr. Kodak, who had come out of the back, spread his arms and tenderly embraced his three pupils.



While we were repairing the territory devastated by Schneider’s faction with the help of Nick and the others and raiding their strongholds, we received a summons from the king addressed to the master of Trundle. We couldn’t very well ignore it.

“Lady Serephione!” Mrs. Marcus hugged me and began to cry. It had been a long time since we’d met, and she was a cute old lady now. Lou hastily moved from my shoulder to my head, stepping on Miyu in my pocket, who yelped. I patted her large back and lifted my tear-stained face.

“If you’re the new master of Trundle...what happened to our Lady Erza?” she asked.

“Mrs. Marcus... My grandmother will visit here again, so don’t worry.”

“So that means... Ah... Lady Erza...” Mrs. Marcus weakly fell to her knees. Sasara, who was accompanying me, gently helped her up and sat her on the sofa.

Following Gardner’s evacuation orders, all schools were closed, and people who could leave the capital fled to the suburbs. The Marcus Trade Company had kept its doors open in the middle of the capital, where the supply flow was

uncertain and people were sparse, despite the war.

“I’m glad to hear that Lady Erza is okay. It’s thanks to her patronage that we’re able to do business. This young lady has also been visiting often lately.” She smiled at Sasara.

Sasara was the only female executive soldier in active duty now that Elise had quit. I imagined she was super popular because of that. Nobody would bother the shop knowing that Sasara liked it. I glanced at the M mark on Sasara’s uniform.

“Thank you for keeping your promise, Mrs. Marcus.”

“I’ve done nothing, Lady Serephione.”

Looks were important. Sasara’s gorgeous uniform and spotless appearance served as self-protection. *I have to do something to thank her...* or so I thought, before I realized it was unnecessary. She’d shown mercy to a saint. There would be a bigger reward for that than I could give.

“So, what brings you here today?”

“Has my grandmother left any of her gowns here?”

“Four of them. They’re ready for delivery.”

“I’ll help, but I want two of those tailored to fit me and Sasara. By the end of the day!”

“So, you need a dress suitable for a master... Who are you seeing?”

“I’ve been summoned by the king,” I chuckled.

“My... That means the queen will also be in attendance... You’ll have to look strikingly strong and beautiful. This will be the Trundle family’s first audience with the king.”

“Exactly.”

“Uh, Serephi, why are you having one tailored for me?”

“She’s going to take you along, of course!” replied Mrs. Marcus exasperatedly.

“Y-You are?”

Mrs. Marcus gave a sidelong glance to the panicked Sasara and stood up. “Lady Serephione, there will be no need to tailor Lady Erza’s gowns. Come this way.”

She led me to the fitting room in the back. Her pupils opened the sliding doors of the wall-to-wall closet. I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of colorful, extravagant gowns.

“Cuuute!” exclaimed Miyu, the most feminine in our party. She poked her face out from my pocket and wagged her tail in excitement. It kind of hurt where it was hitting me...

“These are gorgeous... What are they for?”

“Lady Erza had all of these tailored for you. We can’t have you wear these six, since the designs are too childish...but I think the others will work if we just alter the hemline.”

“Why...?”

“Lady Erza had five dresses made for you per season while you were away. She said that dresses are a woman’s battle armor and that you never know when you’ll need one.”

Grandmother...

A pure white dress on the very end caught my eye.

“This was her most recent order. We received it by letter. It’s a wedding dress for you. Congratulations on your engagement! Lady Erza ordered that it be white with light blue accents, and to make it the best in the world! Those were all of her instructions.”

Grandmother...you dummy! You didn’t have to do this while you were feeling ill...

The dress was simple, lustrous, and had light blue stitching in some key places.

“It’s like Lou...” whispered Miyu.

It was playful, like Lou bounding through a pure white field of snow. Anyone who knew that I lived with Lou would smile when they saw it. This wasn’t the

kind of thing you make in secret in case of an emergency! It was something to fuss over with me to decide...

This...isn't battle armor, is it?

As the successor to my perfect grandmother, nobody would let it slip if I made a mistake. I took a deep breath to cool my head.

"Which would you recommend, Mrs. Marcus?"

"Let's see... How about this one? The Trundle coat of arms is woven into it."

The top part was solid white silk, but the Trundle sword and snake—probably the lesser dragon—were woven into it like a pattern. The skirt was black satin. It was elegant.

"Miss Sere, it's my father! This will look great on you!" Miyu the maiden urged from my chest pocket. *I know, I know.*

"Wouldn't this be shocking to the queen?"

Mrs. Marcus chuckled. "Then how about this one?"

"Ohh!" Sasara exclaimed.

It was made of a thin, shiny gray fabric, resembling a man's frock coat with a stuffed collar. The waist was marked by a sash-like belt with pearls sewn on it, and below the waist, it extended in an A-line down to the knees. Knight-style pants in the same fabric could be seen starting at the overlapping section.

It was a pantsuit! The first of its kind for a woman in this world, apart from knight school students and military uniforms! There was plenty of room to hide a knife in the voluminous fabric of the top. This was...the new and improved version of my ninja outfit.

Also...

"Serephi, you can't show your ankles. It's unseemly."

"But grandmother, I can't fight if the hem isn't short. If it's unseemly, then I can just wear pants and boots!"

"Well, isn't that innovative... I'm sure that will look nice on you, my Serephi."

My grandmother hated me showing my ankles...so why would she want me to

wear this?

“These pearls were brought in by Lady Erza and processed here. They’re lovely ones from Regan Island.”

Oh, the lesser dragon gave Miyu’s present for him (I collected them, though) to my grandmother. Jeez, can’t anyone use things for themselves?

“The lesser dragon’s protection is on each pearl,” said Lou. “He must have sensed the unsettled times and wanted to protect Erza.”

I’m...I’m loved and protected by adults who act before they speak.

“I choose this one. I’d like to change the embroidery a little bit if you don’t mind. Also, I’d like a matching one made for Sasara if possible. I’ll reward you handsomely!”

“Of course! Just leave it to the Marcus Trade Company!”

Chapter 4: Meeting with the King of Judore

We arrived at the castle in a jet-black carriage made of rosewood, drawn by a black Trundle horse. For some reason, the guild held a tournament to decide who our coachman/valet would be, and Mr. Kodak was the lucky winner. *Wait, aren't we in a war?*

We got past the gates thanks to our VIC—Very Important Carriage—and stopped at a parking space.

Mr. Kodak graciously opened the door and helped first Sasara, then me out of the carriage. I had Asu on my shoulder, Lou at my side, and Miyu in my chest pocket next to my plate. They were all covered thoroughly with illusion magic. It would be a big deal if they were seen.

Before my eyes stood the coolest, handsomest, kindest person in the world, with a warm smile he reserved only for his family. It had been two years.

“Father!”

“Serephione... Welcome back.”

We embraced—reservedly, considering the place—and kissed each other's cheeks.

“I can finally see you again, my Serephi...”

“Father... Father...”

We whispered to each other quietly so that only we could hear.

“Shall we get the unpleasant part out of the way?”

My father, Count Granzeus, was accompanying me today as my guardian and an allied lord. I had my father, Sasara, and Mr. Kodak, not to mention Lou, Asu, and Miyu. I wasn't scared of anything—I felt invincible.

My father cast a soundproofing spell with his pointer finger. “Lou, Asu, thank you so much for protecting Serephione. Miyu, I am her father, Isaac. Thank you for accompanying my Serephione.”

Lou and Asu nodded in return. Miyu blushed slightly, hopped out of my pocket, kissed my papa's cheek, and then landed back on my chest! Perfect execution!

"Wow..."

Miyu! You're even more boy-crazy as a holy beast than you were before?! I'll tattle on you to Renza!

"It's a blessing from Miyu, father."

"What an honor. Thank you, Miyu! Shall we get going, Serephione?"

I gently put my arm around his elbow. *I'm with my father again!* The tension in my shoulders melted away.

"Welcome Count Granzeus, followed by Serephione Granzeus, lady of the Trundle domain!"

The door opened graciously before me and my father. He narrowed his eyes, seeing the lineup of people waiting on either side.

"There may not be many people, but they're all major people in this kingdom..." my father noted. "It's dangerous to have them all in one place."

I sent messages out to Ziek, my brother, and Gillain. My grandmother had taught me that you can never be too careful.

I straightened my back and entered the great hall, the main part of the Judore castle, escorted by my father. Sasara followed behind me, and Mr. Kodak behind her. Everybody held their breath as they watched us.

I was wearing the new and improved gray ninja outfit that Mrs. Marcus had prepared for me. The Trundle coat of arms was embroidered on the back in a thread slightly lighter than the fabric. It wasn't flashy, but anybody could see it clearly. On my left arm was the Galé coat of arms and the emblem given to me by Gillain that symbolized my future as an empress, a white tangerine flower. I had nothing of the sort for Judore. My makeup was done perfectly, just as my grandmother had taught me, and my hair was pulled back in one of her hair ornaments.

Sasara was in a black version of the new and improved ninja outfit; her blonde hair was bright against the black fabric. Mr. Kodak, meanwhile, was wearing a male version of Sasara's outfit. Each of them had the Trundle coat of arms embroidered on the back. The black long boots we each wore clicked as we walked in long strides.

My father was in a flawless black suit. As a whole, we looked rather ominous in all black and gray in a space where people usually wore bright, flashy colors.

The king and queen were seated on thrones in an alcove several steps higher.

The king, who I was seeing for the first time in this life, looked much like Gardner, but unlike in the book, his gaze was vacant and wandering. *He ordered his soldiers so vigorously in my memories, so what happened to that spirit?*

Then there was the queen. She was as beautiful as I'd remembered, dressed in an extravagant golden gown. She seemed ageless. I hadn't been her enemy in the book, but I also hadn't been an ally. To her, everything would be all right in the end as long as Gardner became king.

Michael, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Judore, awaited us at the bottom of the steps. He was a man in his mid-sixties, with dark brown hair streaked with gray; together with the queen, he held the real power in the kingdom. As long as he didn't get in my way, it didn't matter to me though.

My father, Sasara, and Mr. Kodak all knelt quietly. Me? I stayed standing, of course.

The prime minister raised one eyebrow. "Your head is rather high, Lady Serephione. Have you forgotten your manners during your time in the countryside?"

"I am a Trundle. Why must I kneel to those weaker than myself?"

Trundles only knelt to those to whom they had sworn allegiance. Geintz and my grandmother served the previous king because they recognized his strength. Grandmother never kneeled to the current king, or rather, she had no intention of meeting him.

The only people I would get on my knees for were my beloved three holy beasts, Kilama, and...Gillain.

Everyone in this room who was familiar with Judoran history should have known that fact, but seeing it in practice was another matter altogether. Everyone held their breath.

“Be that as it may, there is the issue of respecting one’s elders. Don’t you find it disrespectful?”

“I might feel that way if our relationship was mutually respectful, but I lost my desire to practice good manners with the royal family after nearly being killed by one of you. I came here not in accordance with your summons, but to wrap up a few announcements at once.”

An elegant laugh resonated throughout the room as if to smooth out the tension. “What an interesting young lady,” the queen said. “I’m glad to see you have a strong spirit. Thank you for meeting with my son recently. I hear it was quite a worthwhile visit, and that he formed a rather nice friendship with you and the emperor. After this audience, I am preparing a welcome banquet. I’d like to get to know you better.”

I soothed Miyu, who was angry at the queen’s ridiculing attitude, and used Appraisal. She shone...red!

Clarissa Judore (Queen of the Kingdom of Judore)

Status: Good

Skills: Fire magic, earth magic, scheming

This was my first time seeing red when using Appraisal. Red meant ill will, but I realized that I couldn’t actually do anything about it now that I’d seen it. I wouldn’t have used Appraisal if I weren’t already on guard. I wondered what dark plans she’d cooked up to get “scheming” under her skills.

“Lady Serephione, the queen is speaking to you. Answer her!” Michael demanded.

I looked directly at the king as I spoke. “Your Majesty, I came today out of respect for your title, despite the fact that we are in a time of war, because I was somewhat curious. Please state your business at once.”

Angry voices from every direction scolded me for speaking to the king while still standing, but the king remained vacant and expressionless. The higher-ranking nobles in the room leaned in, confused.

Appraisal! He shone blue.

Thomas Judore (King of the Kingdom of Judore, E-rank adventurer)

Status: Poisoned by yamweed, diminished capacity

Skills: Fire magic, water magic, wind magic, earth magic, light magic

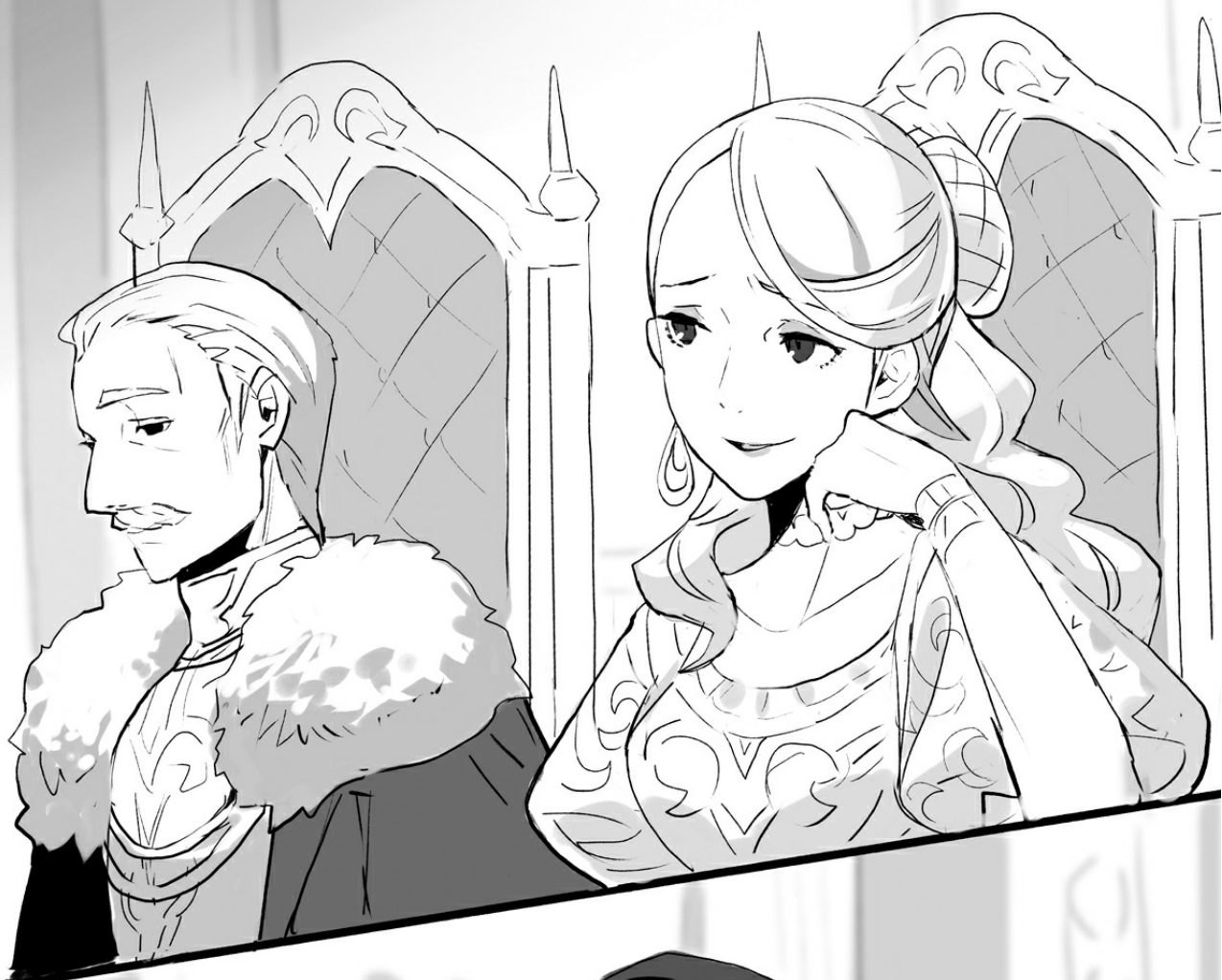
“He’s poisoned...” said Miyu. “He must not understand anything anymore.”

“Recovery is impossible at this stage,” said Lou gravely. “Even though he’s a user of light...”

Yamweed poisoning was nonfatal. It just rotted the body and mind away until the victim was a living corpse. It would have been called a narcotic in Japan. Who had done this, and when? The queen? Or maybe Schneider?

I turned to my side. “Father...”

He stood up quietly with a severe expression. “I had no idea... He was able to at least give a small nod when I met him three years ago.”



It hurt my heart to see the king like this. It almost seemed kinder to use poison from a Marre bee that would kill him instantly. But this let me know that it couldn't have been the king who'd summoned me.

As someone born and raised in Judore, I lowered my head slightly, prayed, and turned to leave.

"Wait, Lady Serephione!" the queen shouted. "I don't think it would hurt to stay and listen to what we have to say."

Her voice was high-pitched. The Prime Minister raised his hand, and a dozen or so of his personal guards surrounded us with swords drawn.

"Do you understand the meaning of drawing swords on our master?" said Mr. Kodak exasperatedly. I glared at them, and half of the guards started to quiver.

Kodak and Sasara leaped to head height and smoothly swung roundhouse kicks into each of the guards' faces in half circles. Once they'd each landed on the ground where the other had started, the guards all fell outward like sunflower petals. They had only lost consciousness. *How kind of the two of you.*

We headed for the exit, stepping over the fallen soldiers with long strides.

"Father, what are your plans for today?"

"The budgets aren't done yet, so I have to go back to work. This is all because of those fools who are fighting in the capital. I wish I could just give up and quit, but I have to think of the people. I'd rather spend some time relaxing with you, though," he sighed.

"I'm busy fighting as well. Let's relax together in the Granzeus domain once everything is wrapped up."

"H-Hey there! Stop!"

"Wait!"

We chatted as we walked, paying no mind to the commotion around us.

"Actually... Matsuki went out to do some shopping, and his foot was hit by a fireball from a fight. He's undergoing treatment right now, so we can't offer you much in the way of hospitality. Sorry, Serephi."

“What?” Lou growled. A huge wave of rage poured out of him! *That makes the illusion magic pointless!*

“E-Eeeeeek!”

“Gahhh!”

The nobles in attendance slumped to the floor.

“G-Gardner! Hurry, hurry and persuade Serephione!” wailed the queen, still clinging to her armrest.

“L-Lady Serephione!”

Prince Gardner and Cecil appeared out of the wings. They ran up to me and knelt at my feet. The prince looked a bit worn out.

“Lady Serephione, I apologize for our carelessness today!”

“It’s been a while, Your Highness. I came on a summons from the king...but it seems he’s ill. He doesn’t even seem cognizant of himself. Who’s been using his title in his place for all this time?”

“I... I’m sorry...”

“So nobody noticed because the climate has been stable for the past several years, none of the lords have changed generations, and you’ve been governing peacefully without any issue. It would be quite the challenge to drag the king out in this state. I suppose you didn’t think there would be anyone rude enough to speak to him directly.”

This was my mother country...but it always betrayed me. I couldn’t love Judore, even in this life. But my Granzeus and Trundle domains belonged to Judore without question...it was frustrating.

“Lady Serephione, I understand that in Galé you told Gardner here to think of the people first. I believe if Trundle and Gardner joined forces, your enemies would turn tail and run, leaving the people with fewer casualties. Wouldn’t that be ideal for you?” The queen chuckled, smiling as if things had turned out just as she’d thought.

“Serephione.” Cecil lowered his head deeply as if to tell me to stop bullying the prince. It was certainly against Trundle principles to bully those of lower

status. I turned around to look at the queen.

“Trundles hate cowardice most of all. First of all, I am disgusted that you have called me here in the name of the king. Could you please explain to everyone present here the details of His Majesty’s illness? Next, the reason for our war with Schneider is in retaliation for the violation of our territory. This is on a completely different level from a family dispute, and it makes me sick that you’d try to side with the winner here. Lastly, joining hands is something one does with those who are equal in strength. It is a wonder how you can make such a grandiose proposal when you do not have even a tenth of Trundle’s might.”

I put a bit of pressure on her directly to communicate our gap in strength.

“‘Damage to the people,’ you say?” I continued. “Trundle would be much more capable of minimizing damage and avoiding mistakes acting alone. Joining up with a magician we don’t know well will only drag us down. You’re speaking complete nonsense, Your Majesty.”

“You insolent girl!” The queen, humiliated in front of a large number of high-ranking nobles, turned red in the face from rage.

“Mother!” Prince Gardner ran between me and his mother and spread his arms. “Lady Serephione is not just the master of Trundle, but the empress-to-be of Galé! Emperor Gillain has given her equal power to himself! That makes her your equal in status, or perhaps even higher. You’re the one who should watch the way you speak! Prime Minister, am I wrong?”

“No... It is as you say.”

“You’re talking back to me, Gardner? Prime Minister!”

“Your Majesty, I advised you that Trundle would be difficult to deal with and that our best course of action would be to leave them alone...”

“What is this little girl able to do?! She should listen to me when I speak kindly to her. How insolent. All of you, seize the Trundle!”

“Sere, don’t speak any more! We shouldn’t stay here long,” said Asu into my ear.

I had my companions step back, raised one hand above my head, gathered up countless wings, and threw them into the foreheads of the organizers and the gallery! The air became still all at once. Nobody could move except my people.

This was the new and improved version of my Paralysis magic. I'd revised it based on how things had gone with Cecil before. Instead of direct touch, the wind became an extension of my fingertips, allowing me to use the spell on distant opponents.

"Everybody here either tried to capture me or watched it happen and did nothing. I believe that makes them enemies of Trundle."

As I turned my head and surveyed the room threateningly, one man forced his limbs to move through the paralysis and came up to me.

"That's Marquis Berth," my father informed me quietly.

Marquis Berth. The head of the reformists, and the queen's backer.

"Your Majesty...it would have been a great success if we could have brought Trundle into the fold. But trying to intimidate Trundle into submission is the worst kind of bad move. Since when did you become such a fool...? You have awoken the sleeping lioness."

I have a tiger instead of a lion, though.

Marquis Berth then turned to me. "Lady Serephione, I would like to set aside political matters and thank you as a parent."

"I don't recall meeting you."

"I'm Isabella's father. I'm told that you've saved my daughter a lot of embarrassment."

"Isabella... Is she doing well?"

"Yes, I'm very proud of her. She's grown more beautiful by the day."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I saw no deception in the way he smiled while thinking of his daughter.

"I may not be the most pure of heart in some ways, but I wouldn't stoop so low as to return a favor done for my family with ill will. I don't have the strength

to stand up against Lady Serephione's strength of spirit, anyway. The Berth family hereby declares its neutrality in the dispute between the royal family and Trundle."

"Berth! What are you talking about?" the queen demanded. "Do you have any idea how many accommodations I've made for you?!"

"Yes, I can say the same for you. We owe each other quite a lot."

"Isn't that a bit too convenient?" said my father quietly, stepping in front of me. "You created friction between the princes by backing the queen and supporting the second prince. That resulted in the first prince attacking my daughter and nearly killing her. You are partially to blame. There can be no neutrality now."

"I couldn't possibly have imagined the prince attacking Lady Serephione at a sacred school. People make mistakes, don't they, Count? If you require an apology, I could rub my head on the floor for you."

"Could you say the same if the same thing happened to Isabella? I was separated from my daughter for over two years."

"I apologize for my error in judgment, Lady Serephione. You're kind enough not to leave Isabella by the wayside, aren't you?"

It was true that I was grateful to Isabella. It was also true that he was trying to leverage that connection to get around me. What an irritating man.

"Stop this nonsense! All of you, restrain this insolent girl!"

The scene was becoming increasingly chaotic. The queen was frustrated that things weren't going her way, Marquis Berth was being sly and self-serving, and my father was quietly venting about the treatment I'd received. The Prime Minister and other high-ranking nobles looked on, too frightened to move.

I looked up at the king amid the tumult. *This all comes back to you. If you'd had it together, you wouldn't have had an opening to be taken advantage of... Everyone would have had no choice but to follow what you said.*

You were functional to an extent before. Why did you become a puppet in this

life? Did the queen's side overreact because of Schneider's action?

"This is a royal order!"

The queen's grating voice interrupted my inner monologue.

"Capture that girl! You have all sworn an oath of absolute loyalty to the crown, except for Trundle! Now is the time to show me proof that you are not a traitor! Do you think you can betray the royal family and survive in this country?"

"A royal order?" my father growled in response, glancing at the king and then back at the queen.

"The king has entrusted me with his seal! My orders are royal orders!"

"And you're going to use that seal without a cabinet meeting?"

"This is an emergency!"

Has the kingdom fallen apart this much...?

The immobile queen wielded her royal decree over her immobile vassals. It was all too ridiculous. If they followed her royal order (?) and attacked us, we would just defeat them in turn. We headed for the exit.

Crash! The door that we had come up to was suddenly smashed into dust. Everyone turned their heads to look at once.

Once all the little pieces of the entrance had settled onto the floor, I saw Elise standing there wearing a pure white shrine maiden outfit, her ankle still curved in a beautiful high kick form. She was buzzing with static electricity.

"Saint!" The faithful among us desperately bent over and lowered their heads.

"Hold back!" a loud voice boomed.

It's been a while, Kaku... Your voice is as penetrating as ever!

After Elise looked all around the room with a fierce glare, she entered alongside Suke-Kaku, radiating electricity from her whole body. Once she came up to us next to the exit, she winked at Miyu on my chest.

Miyu opened her eyes wide, nodded, jumped onto Elise, and toned down her illusion magic. Her outline appeared faintly next to Elise, and those who could

see her trembled. Elise then knelt at my feet along with Suke-Kaku, took my hand, and gracefully kissed it. *Are you some kind of actress?!*

Elise and Miyu haven't seen each other for all this time, right? How are they so in tune with each other?

"The saint is positively...crackling...with divinity!"

"That shadow next to her...is that the fabled holy beast?"

"Why are the saint and holy beast kneeling to the Trundle girl?"

"Oh! Look! It's not just the holy beast of the east, the holy beast of the south is here too!"

Suke swooned and collapsed backward. Maybe he was able to see the holy beasts now both because he'd been working alongside someone of such deep faith as Elise and due to his respect for her.

I wasn't sure if I could live up to the example she set as an actress, but I gently took Elise's hand, stood her up, and embraced her. We whispered into each other's ears.

"I-Is this good?"

"You're doing great, Serephi."

I recast illusion magic on Miyu, and she returned to my chest. *Good work!*

"Elise!" Sasara came running and joined the embrace. I was so glad to see that they'd both grown up into beautiful, pure women!

"Oh, the saints' magic has grown so much!"

"Which one, Miyu?"

"Both of them. It's so cute how they support each other!"

"You're cute too!"

"I know!"

Oh, okay then...

Elise slowly turned toward the throne, leaving her pal Sasara at her side and hiding me behind her back. They were trying to protect me like an older sister

would do, just like when we were in school together. It touched me.

The saint said just five words in a low voice.

“The queen is hereby excommunicated.”

To be excommunicated was to be abandoned by the gods of the earth that we worshipped at shrines as well as the moon goddess. It was the ultimate disgrace for people of this world. Silence fell over the room.

“I made it clear that I wished for this civil war to be resolved between the concerned parties and that if uninvolved people, including our holy Serephione, were harmed, you would be excommunicated. I deem it impermissible that you have tried to use Serephione to your own ends and caused repercussions on civilians with no connection to the royal family.”

“Oh ho ho... Excommunicated, you say? That won’t bother me in the slightest. There is no need for faith in the shrines in Judore. Most of the people of Judore respect the royal family itself as an object of faith.”

Elise responded, unfazed, in a cold tone. “The king of Judore is required to adhere to the faith. Have you forgotten the vow you swore at the shrine when you first took the throne?”

“Who can govern this kingdom if you excommunicate me? Schneider rebelled against the king, and Gardner is a minor! I am the only one capable. You have no way to excommunicate me! How dare you be so impudent as to meddle in the internal politics of Judore!”

“She calls what she’s been doing governing?” Asu scoffed. “The royal family of Judore always has something new to amuse me. I’ll have to tell Gillain about this clown show.”

Asu dissed my home country again... Sniff.

“I’ll back her up.” Lou’s boiling point had lowered after hearing about Matsuki’s injury. He moved behind Elise and shot off lightning as if it had come from Elise herself!

“Ahhhh!”

Lightning struck the ground in front of the queen. Immobilized by the

paralysis spell, she lost consciousness in shock.

“It’s the saint’s divine punishment...just like the rumors said...”

“I can’t believe she mocked a saint...”

“Eek! Th-The gods are angry!”

You’re not wrong...my gods are angry. Or maybe just fed up?

Elise glanced at the queen, then gave a sad look to the king, who still had no reaction to everything going on around him. “She slipped poison to the king... This kingdom is worse than scum. Ha, I can’t believe I used to think of this kingdom as my home country. The king is permitted to rule by virtue of making an oath to the gods. Thus, to harm the king is to turn a sword on the gods. All involved will receive divine punishment in turn. Be prepared.”

Now that she was a saint, Elise had no nationality.

Many of the others in the room had gone pale. The prime minister was biting his lip. They’d all just seen a divine punishment before their very eyes. Elise was *scary*, almost as scary as my grandmother.

“Prime Minister? Who of high status in this kingdom does everybody agree is impartial, competent, and not affiliated with either faction? It would be in your best interest to answer truthfully.”

“Perhaps...the Minister of Finance, Granzeus.”

Oh, it’s my papa’s time to shine...

“I will entrust this kingdom’s sovereignty to the shrines temporarily while I look for an adult of the royal bloodline who is more suitable to rule. In the meantime, Count Granzeus, could you take the helm of the kingdom?”

“I’ll have to decline,” he answered bluntly. All the men who were desperate for political power had their jaws dropped.

“Please, Count...” Elise pleaded.

The moment Elise started speaking, I sensed a huge magical presence coming at me at high speed.

“Sere! Defense!” Lou shouted.

I didn't know what exactly was going on, so I cast physical protection on the entire room and magical protection on myself and my companions.

Elise, Sasara, and Kodak instantly crowded around me, seeing that I'd picked up on something.

Then, my father crouched down, still glaring upward, and put his hands on the ground. "We didn't get away fast enough," he sighed.

"I guess it's inevitable that so many important people in one room would be attacked," Lou grumbled. "Here it comes! It's fire!"

"Gather to me, vast ocean!" Miyu summoned ocean water to the ceiling, creating a thick wall.

Clang! Something gigantic struck the castle, crushing the ceiling into bits. Miyu's wall of water caught the rubble as it fell.

Is this for real?! It's a meteor! The air and earth shook with the impact.

My father distributed the shock away from our immediate surroundings. I realized that since Terl was a guardian of not only ice, but earth as well, my father had been practicing that sort of seismic defense magic... *I knew I could count on him!*

"It's a meteorite, coming in hot! This place won't hold for long! Evacuate!" I shouted. A huge meteorite came into view, burning red in the sky behind the wreckage of the castle. The water barrier wouldn't be enough to stop it.

The nobles who were gathered in the room scattered like a bunch of baby spiders.

"It's falling apart!" Miyu yelled. I recast the physical and magical protection around us.

The wall of water on the ceiling fell apart with a *whoosh*, with all of the water turning to steam at once. In the next moment, a ten-meter-wide meteorite fell with a *boom* into what had previously been the audience hall. Something moved above it.

"Stand back, everyone."

"Yes!"

Sasara, Kodak, Elise, and her companions Suke-Kaku, looking at me with concern, jumped back instantly and put distance between us so as to not hinder me or the holy beasts.

“Father?” I asked, not taking my eyes off the meteorite.

“Serephi, I can help you, you know.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Maribelle, right? I have Lou and your lapis lazuli. Don’t worry.”

“Father...”

“He’s coming. Don’t come out yet, Miyu!” Lou grew to full size with a flash and stepped in front of me and my father.

Once the ice dust above the meteorite had melted into the atmosphere, a white robe appeared.

“Huh? Serephione? You’ve grown! And you’re looking prettier than ever...”

“We can skip the formalities, thank you very much.”

It was Schneider, whose curly blond hair had grown down to his back. I glared at him. “So, I know you hate me, but why did you target my grandmother? How can you be so totally unfair having lived in Japan before? It really pissed me off.”

“Hey, you’re slipping back into how we used to talk. I guess you were probably a high schooler too, huh? Anyway, I’m not sure where you got that idea. You’re my favorite person in this world, and the person I trust the most. I mean, just think about it. You’re the only person who can understand me, and I’m the only person who can understand why you do what you do. The one I hate is that monster over there.”

He looked over at the former queen with disgust and spat at her. Next to her, Gardner and Cecil stood trembling as the king looked on with blank eyes. *They didn’t run? I guess Gardner stayed for his father...*

“Is it you who did *that* to the king?”

“No, I dunno who did. I didn’t even meet him until when I was seven, after my

brother was born. Poor guy.”

Appraisal! He shone blue.

Schneider Judore (First Prince of the Kingdom of Judore,
S-rank adventurer, master of Terlnight)

Status: Good

Skills: All magic, plant manipulation, reincarnated,
world-weary, avenger

He was telling the truth. And “all magic” probably meant he could create new types of magic like I could, as well as use advanced healing magic.

“Couldn’t you do something for him?”

“I don’t have any obligations to a dad who didn’t protect my mother, do I? And anyway, it’s too late for him...his brain is beyond recovery.” Schneider slumped his shoulders.

“Didn’t you consider the location before you sent a meteorite to the capital? Now the fire is going to spread and hurt civilians, including the ones who sympathize with you.”

“Yeah, that was messier than I thought it would be. Not the best foothold here. We don’t have much time to chat. I was planning to end this whole thing today, but do you want to turn over a new leaf?”

“I told you, I’m pissed. You think I’ll just let you get away?”

“You can believe me or not, but I’m not the one who attacked the lord of Trundle. I guess I have to be grateful to her for being a catalyst, though. Let’s relocate for now. But first...” Schneider took a red rose from his chest and kissed it.

Asu soared up into the sky out of caution, Lou growled in front of me, and Miyu, who was in my chest pocket, created a wall of water that was invisible to me and my father. The rose, though, grew a vine, fell to the ground, then shot not at us, but directly at the unconscious Queen Clarissa.

“M-Mother!” Gardner rushed over to his mother to cut off the vine, but he wasn’t fast enough. The green vine, covered in sharp thorns, instantly wrapped itself around Clarissa.

“Aaaaagh!”

Blood began to seep onto the floor as she screamed in the throes of death. Her voice then faded, leaving only the sound of the building crumbling.

“See, Serephione? Now I have blood on my own hands.”

“...”

I braced myself. My father gently supported my waist with a severe look on his face.

The queen had undoubtedly taken the lives of tens, no, hundreds of people. She was a villain who had tried to poison the king’s consort, as well as targeted the king himself. But, still...I couldn’t take the scene before me as justified.

“Waaaah!” Gardner wailed. “Brother, why? Why?! I’ve respected you so much ever since I was little!”

Schneider looked at Gardner perplexedly and tilted his head. “Gardner, if I recall correctly, don’t you like vegetables and white fish?”

“Wh-Why are you bringing that up now?!” Gardner cried.

“Well, the reason I know your favorite foods is because my mother and I always got your leftover scraps to eat. And they were days-old, nearly spoiled scraps too. They said that was all pigs like us deserved. They even added a little poison as a treat sometimes.”

“Huh...?”

“That was what I lived on until I managed to sneak past the surveillance on me and go out hunting for myself. Maybe I should be thanking you for leaving me so much of your food after you chewed on it to your heart’s content.”

“No...”

“You say you respected me? Is that how you treat someone you respect? Feed them your scraps?”

“That’s not...”

“Do you know my mother’s name? The woman who was the king’s consort before?”

“I...”

“You don’t even know the name of the woman your mother killed? Was she too lowly for you to care about her name? Ignorance is a sin, Gardner. You made me this way.”

“No...”

Gardner went motionless, still clutching the vine that had stolen his mother in an attempt to pull it off.

Schneider’s all-important mother had passed away. There was nothing holding him back anymore.

Schneider looked over at us. “I notice you have another gentle magic presence with you, apart from the holy beasts of the west and south. So the rumor that the saint contracted with one is true... You’re so lucky to have the companions that you do, Serephione. Especially the emperor.”

“You think it’s luck?” Elise’s cold voice resonated through the sound of the building crumbling. “I’ve never known anyone who’s worked as hard day in and day out as Serephione. That doesn’t just mean in training. She works day and night to make the people around her happy. It’s only natural that the holy beasts would love her.”

“Are you saying I haven’t worked hard enough?”

“You said you trust Serephione. If you do, then you should have relied on her and asked her for help, not tried to drag her into a war and attack her! You should have been more serious in dealing with others. That’s something you should have been able to do after growing and gaining strength.”

Does she think I would have been able to help him? She overestimates me. Schneider may not have tragic memories from the book like I do, but he’s experienced suffering in this life that nobody else could sympathize with. And I was doing my best to run away from him.

“Don’t let it get to you, Sere.” Lou rubbed his head against my leg. “It wasn’t your fault that that situation went bad. You were just a little girl.”

“You have a beautiful heart, saint,” Schneider chuckled. “Oh, gentle saint, would you nominate me as the successor to the throne?”

“No. You’ve killed too many of the people you were meant to protect as king.”

“I think most people here have killed many.”

Elise’s face twisted.

“Well, I suppose he’s still king as long as he’s not dead. I’ll take care of him as a spoil of war.”

“Ah!”

The rose vine cut itself off from the queen and immediately wrapped itself around the king. Then the vine shrunk all at once and pulled him toward Schneider like a balloon, leaving the king floating in the air on his back.

“Father!” Gardner screamed.

Trying my best to appear calm, I asked with as little feeling as possible. “Honestly...it doesn’t bother me at all for you to take the king hostage. You’ve had your revenge on the queen, and now the king. Isn’t it safe to say that your vengeance has been carried out now?”

“Of course not! You think this was enough to satisfy my grudge? Do you know how much my mother suffered before she died? Besides, don’t you have to retaliate for what happened to Trundle? So yeah, I thought I’d spice things up a little. What better way to do that than a literal war around the throne? I’m sure regardless of what you say, you don’t want to see your poor king chopped up, gentle Serephione, beloved of the holy beasts, master of the righteous Trundle!”

“I’m not interested in the Judoran throne! Wait!”

“Oh, I’ll wait, Serephione. Our next date can be...your birthday next year. Let’s have it at the magic academy stadium. I’ll bring Maribelle, of course. Don’t do anything imprudent before then. You don’t know what’ll happen to this guy

otherwise. Wait patiently.”

A divine light flashed, and I saw Terl’s silhouette. When the light disappeared, Schneider and the king had vanished along with it.

“Schneider!” I yelled. “Asu! Chase him!”

“We shouldn’t chase him too far,” Asu replied. “There were no thorns on that rose vine. The king is unharmed. And we’re not perfectly prepared for battle. Schneider retreated, so let’s take some time and prepare ourselves.”

“Terl...” Lou was still looking at the spot where Terl had been.

“Damn it!” *He got away!* I kicked the floor.

“Waaaaah!” Gardner broke down in tears, having just lost both of his parents all at once.

“I’ll take it from here as someone who works for the castle, Serephione,” my father told me. “You should go back for now. I’ll talk to you later. It’s a shame that we don’t have time to relax together.”

I stood there, feeling dreary and dark. He squeezed my hand and nodded. I nodded silently, afraid to say the wrong thing as a master, and left the castle.

The Trundle mansion in the capital had a tight barrier around it formed by three holy beasts. The only people who could go in were those of Trundle blood and a few vassals, including Orcus. I waved to greet Orcus, who was lowering his head to me, and Lou and I headed toward my grandmother’s room, dragging our feet heavily.

Asu had flown off, and Miyu had also returned to her swamp. As holy beasts, they could charge their already-plentiful magic even further by going to their homes.

I opened the door to find my brother sitting elegantly in a chair next to our grandmother’s bed, reading a foreign book.

“Brother...”

“Welcome back, Serephione.”

My brother stood up, gently hugged me, and kissed the top of my head. Then he moved aside to let me sit down.

My grandmother had been sent from the Trundle domain to the capital. While her hair was unfortunately still white, her face had regained its color, and she was sleeping soundly. It concerned me that she hadn't woken up once since then, so she hadn't been eating, but the lesser dragon assured me that sleep was the most important thing for her. She wasn't gaining weight, but I'd placed a spell on her so that she wasn't losing weight either. She was a sleeping beauty, her skin a fair pink.

"Larouza, you're here?" asked Lou. I held my grandmother's hand as I interpreted for him.

"Yes. There are people I can trust like Enrique back in the Granzeus domain, and I was concerned that our grandmother's protection would be stretched thin."

"Grandmother... I failed..." I whimpered. "Schneider got away, the king was taken as a hostage, and I let the queen be murdered right before my eyes..." I placed her hand on my cheek. "Why did I even go? Ha ha, it didn't accomplish anything. It only hurt people." Tears came to my eyes. "I'm not good enough to be your successor..."

"Comparing your own actions and accomplishments as a master to Erza's is called hubris."

Lou's words stuck in my chest like a knife.

"You're right... I guess I just wanted to believe that I could find some kind of hope. I hate that I have nothing but bad news to bring home..."

"Serephione?" My brother rested his hand on my lap. "You're not being too prideful at all. The point of today's meeting was to take control of the situation with the king and queen and force them to publicize their intentions with us. It's not your job to protect the queen." He knelt and met eyes with me. "We found out so many things today that we couldn't have if you hadn't been there—the fact that the queen had been governing under the royal seal, that the king was poisoned into a puppetlike state, that Maribelle was responsible for our grandmother's curse, and that Schneider had pounced on that as an

opportunity for himself. Grandmother always says that intel is important, doesn't she? We're going to go over the information that you got today and make a plan together based on it."

"Brother..."

"Grandmother, you agree, don't you?" he said brightly to her. Her hand that I was holding twitched.

"Grandmother..." I mentally said my magic words for her as I always did.

"You have a lot to do tomorrow, Serephone. I'll take over protecting Trundle and our grandmother tonight, so you get plenty of rest."

"But..."

"Do you not trust me?"

"Of course I do!"

My brother stood up and gently petted my head. "You can come into the guild in the afternoon tomorrow, after you've eaten some good food and regained your strength."

"Okay... I'll be in the guest room on the second floor if you need anything..."

"Oh, I'm sleeping in that guest room."

"Huh?"

"You should go to the room where you belong. Lou?"

"I see how it is, Larouza," Lou responded. "You put up with so much just to dote on your sister... Get on, Sere!" Lou grew to full size, picked me up by the scruff of my neck like a kitten, and set me on his back.

"Huh? What? Brother? Lou?"

"See you soon. Take care."

"See you, Larouza!"

"Ahhhh!"

At the same time as my brother smiled and waved, Lou took off at gale speed, and I desperately clung to his neck.

“Aren’t I a good brother, Grandmother?”

Larouza’s green eyes picked up a faint smile on Erza’s face. He grinned and gently kissed her cheek.

Lou kept running at full speed. By the time it was twilight and the stars had come out, I realized that we were heading south.

“No way...”

Just when I understood what my brother and Lou had had in mind, Lou jumped sky-high and crossed over the border.

We landed in Galé territory. In my stunned silence, I saw a small light come into view over the horizon, and as we approached, I saw a small military tent...from which Gillain came out, the first time I had seen him in nearly a month.

Lou’s pace slowed, and we came to a stop before Gillain and a tent.

“Sere.”

My immediate reaction was to look down. I hadn’t wanted to see Gillain tonight. I wasn’t in a state to show myself to him. I didn’t know what to say.

I was struggling on Lou’s back to straighten out my nearly panicking brain when Gillain gently lifted me up by both of my sides. He held me in a hug and patted my back.

“Thanks, Lou.”

Lou chuckled. “You owe me, Gillain.”

Gillain ushered me inside. The tent set up in the wilderness was simple, with several layers of blankets and a couple of tables made up of rows of wagons that might have held his belongings.

He leaned against one of them, sitting directly on the blanket and holding me in his lap. I buried my face in his chest out of embarrassment.

“You’ve lost weight, Sere.”

It was nothing compared to what my grandmother had been through. I silently shook my head.

“Sere, what’s wrong?”

“I didn’t manage to accomplish anything while I was away...”

Gillain has been ruling an entire empire, and I’ve just been...

“I’m relieved just to see you unhurt.”

“...”

“The Galé crest on your clothes is rather flashy.”

“Is that bad?”

“No, it suits you, just like the Trundle crest does.” Gillain chuckled. “Is Lou being shy? Asu and the dragon are here, but not Lou.”

I suddenly lifted my face and met eyes with Gillain. “Uh oh...”

Gillain smiled slightly. “Are you hungry?”

“Do you have food?”

“Well, Asu told me there should be a lot in your Magic Room.”

“You were counting on that?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t tell me you’re not eating properly! You better take everything I have on me and eat it when you get back!”

I took out whatever I could grab from my Magic Room, including both cakes and other preservable foods, and laid it all out on top of the luggage. Gillain took a bite-sized madeleine, broke it in half, put one half in his mouth, and tossed the other to me. Its sweetness gently filled my heart.

“Sere, both your heroic side and your side that gets angry for my sake are mine.”

“Huh...?”

“As is your heart. Leave your heart in my care tonight, and rest well.”

“Leave my heart to you?”

Does that mean to put my problems aside for right now?

“Yeah. Take a deep breath and relax your shoulders.”

“Like this?”

“There you go.”

Gillain put his hands around my back and gently leaned me against himself. He hugged me and kissed my eyelids, and when I involuntarily closed my eyes, drowsiness came to me all at once. I was more tired than I thought.

“You’re always helping me for nothing in return...”

The autumn nights in the wilderness were gradually getting colder, but Gillain’s arms were so warm and soothing with a blanket layered on top...

“That’s not true.”

Gillain gently removed my hair accessory and ran his fingers through my jet-black hair. It felt nice...

“You’re the only one who can sleep on my chest without being overwhelmed by my magic.” His familiar magic seeped deep into my skin. “Your existence is the only thing that affirms my life.” His calm, quiet voice...was like a lullaby...

Some time later...I heard Asu’s mild voice from afar.

“Our dear girl has exhausted herself.”

“I never wanted Sere to feel the loneliness of those who stand at the top... Lou! I thought you promised on that starry night to call me if anyone hurts Sere’s heart! Why didn’t you? I can’t protect her heart, no matter how much defensive magic I use! And Sere would never ask for help herself!”

“It wasn’t impossible to predict Schneider’s appearance...but nobody imagined that we would see such a tragedy.”

My Lou growled. *I hope he’s okay...*

“Sere has pride too,” Lou shot back. “If I called you for help without thinking about the timing first, she would feel even more powerless. You’ll have to deal

with it.”

“I’ll protect her in your place, Gillain,” Asu said. “That will be less of a burden on her.”

“Sere... I hope you can rely on me soon.”

I felt the taste of coffee on my lips again...

Chapter 5: The Year of My Sentencing

Saint Elise didn't allow any cover-up of the incident at the royal castle.

Because of the queen's accidental death, the king's illness, and the immaturity of the two princes, who were not qualified to succeed to the throne, she issued a decree that the rule of Judore would once again be entrusted to a council of shrines and experts. Elise, ever the actress, cried enough to convince my papa to join the panel of experts.

And in the process, a shocking revelation! My beloved Gilbert was actually the king's older brother. He actually had blond hair and blue eyes, the colors of the royal family, instead of black hair to match mine. He had changed his hair color using magic.

"Serephi... I apologize on behalf of the royal family. I was next in line to be king, but I was shot in the eye...by my own side, too, instead of the enemy. It was decided that I was unfit to rule because of my disability, so Thomas was made the new successor to the throne."

So there's been conflict in the royal family for generations.

"I figured that things would work out without me, so I left the castle and joined Trundle through my family connections."

The former king and my grandfather Geintz had been master and servant. Their children, who were close in age, first became childhood friends and then engaged. The engagement was called off after my mother fell in love with my father, though.

I finally understood why Gilbert had looked after me sometimes sternly, yet mostly tenderly. He loved me as if I were his own daughter.

I wondered if my father felt guilty about Gil's misfortune. He'd never let it slip who Gil was or ever said anything bad about him. He didn't stop me from associating with Gil either. But he did scare Gil enough that he called him a demon king!

“So, Thomas...was poisoned and made into a puppet... You took Trundle onto your shoulders, so I’ve prepared myself as well.”

The new king of Judore was now Gil, without any need to wait for the formalities from the shrines. Trundle would back Gilbert up as our new king. The civil war between the two princes had now lost its reason for existence.



A truce was called, thanks to Schneider’s pity (?). What that meant for me was that it was time to take my test to level up into Serephione G., S-Rank Adventurer!

I was the master of Trundle, so it was essential that I be at the strongest rank in Trundle. Being the strongest here meant being the strongest in the world. And can the strongest girl in the world be just an A-rank adventurer? Nay!

“Salutations!”

Ziek grinned. “Are you ready, Miss?”

“Yessir!”

The arena in the back of the guild was abuzz with excitement! It was Trundle’s first cause for celebration in a long time after the string of bad events recently. The room was almost completely full of people.

Is it okay to have everyone important in Trundle in one place, you ask? No problem! My father had strategically placed Granzeus soldiers nearby, so it was kind of like a festival. *Thanks, papa!*

I wished my grandmother could be there to see the fight, but she was still resting. My father was watching over her himself at the Trundle mansion.

That meant my evaluators this time were the S-rank Ziek and Gilbert. And my challenger...

“Don’t hold back, okay, Serephione?”

...was my older brother!

Nobody had anything bad to say about it being a fight between relatives.

“You can do it, Serephi!”

“Go, Serephi!”

“Watch out for those shurikens!”

“I’ll buy you kebabs if you win!”

“Stop making that face, Larouza!”

I heard Alma, Nick, Kodak, Matt, and Lara shouting, as well as some quiet crying from the senior members. I didn’t blame them, since this was a showdown between the grandchildren of their beloved Geintz and Erza.

I definitely wanted Matt to buy me some tasty chicken kebabs...but this was going to be a tough fight to win. Looking at my perfectly guarded brother, I found myself smiling.

I was in my gray ninja outfit. This was my brother, after all, so I needed all the defense I could get. This wasn’t the time to be coy.

My brother was wearing a black shirt and pants with boots. It was a casual outfit, but he looked just as cool as usual with his hair tied back!

“Focus, Sere!”

“Yep, sorry.”

“Can I ask one thing, guildmaster?” My brother suddenly spoke up.

“What is it?”

“I plan to do my best, of course, but Serephone has to fight Schneider soon. Would you allow her to use defensive magic?”

Ziek looked out at the seniors in the audience, who all gave the okay sign.

“Thank you. Go ahead and use as much as you want, Serephone.”

“Okay!”

I’m already protected by Gillain’s plate and my brother’s earrings... I thought as I cast magic on myself. At the same time, I felt a thin film of water from Miyu surround me like a cushion.

“You can do it, Miss Sere!”

“Show Larouza how much you’ve grown, Sere!”

Miyu jumped off of my chest and into Lou's fluffy back fur. He then sat down in a well-behaved manner at the end of the floor where he could see all the action and settled in.

Asu had business in Galé. He hadn't seemed happy to leave. It was too bad for him that he couldn't laugh at me getting beaten up! *Thanks, Gillain!*

My brother and I faced each other in the center. He didn't have any weapons on him, at least not any I saw. That meant he was using shurikens and magic. I'd lose if I stayed too far away!

"Ready... Go!"

I had to finish this quickly! I closed the distance between us at full speed. Catching him by surprise with my first move was my only chance at winning. I took my orlox kunai from my wrist and aimed at his neck with a jump.

He raised his left arm to block me, but I aimed a kick at his chest with my left leg. It missed, though, and my leg only touched his ribs.

He caught my foot with his right hand! I fell onto the ground, rolled to get his arm off of me, and took a big step back to put distance between us.

There goes my biggest chance at winning...

"That was a good kick, Serephione. But I don't think you weigh enough for that. It was light. The emperor must not be feeding you enough. I'll have to submit a complaint."

"Ahh! Stop!"

He was a bit angry, with a crease between his eyebrows! I only rarely saw my brother angry! It was at Gillain, of course, not me!

"I have something to do. Let's get this over with!"

"Sorry to hear it!"

I hurried to put my hands to the floor. It was wooden boarding, but below it...I gathered the sand up all at once and instantly lit it ablaze! It was the scalding sand that Lou had taught me! It surrounded my brother suffocatingly densely. He tried to blow it away with wind magic, but I'd planned for that. I increased the mass so it wouldn't scatter easily! I hadn't told him about scalding

sand before, so this was his first time seeing it. It would be hard to evade on the spur of the moment!

“Agh!”

“Do you surrender yet?”

His shurikens came flying out from the sand! He had used wind magic on them...one after the next...over a hundred of them! It was enough to lower the density of the sand. The shurikens stuck into the ground, surrounding me in an evenly spaced pattern. *No way... Did he calculate where to throw them?*

He started to generate electricity with his right hand, which rained down from above onto the shurikens in the ground! It connected together, trapping me in a birdcage of lightning!

“Serephi!”

“Serephi is trapped!”

“Take him down with your shurikens!”

“You can do it, Miss!”

This was similar to the technique Gillain had used against him at the magic tournament... Was he trying to tell me Gillain had trapped me?! Mean!

“Tch, he wins in numbers,” Lou groaned.

“Where in the world does he keep all those shurikens?” Miyu wondered aloud.

I may have been young at that tournament, but I remembered the match clearly! I had the way he broke out of the cage burned into my memory!

I took my rarely used knife from my ankle and instantly electrified it. Then I threw it through the cage toward his right hand, out of reach of his long legs, sticking it into the ground!

The electricity that he’d been generating from his right hand all started to flow toward my knife. The current was changing! The electricity formed one thick pillar, directly on the knife!

“I see... It’s silver?”

The knife I threw was pure silver. Silver was the best conductor of electricity available in this world, and electricity was attracted to what it was most compatible with. The orlox kunai didn't stand a chance.

"That was a good idea, Serephione... Oh?"

"Huh?"

"Hey..."

"Oh no..."

Crackle... Crackle, crackle...

Sparks flew from the excess of electricity on the knife...close to the already hot sand particles that were already there...igniting them?!

Zappp! Crash! A huge explosion!

The next thing I knew, my brother was holding me in his arms. I lifted my head, heard the cheerful chirping of birds, and saw the clear winter sky stretching endlessly before me... The roof had been blown off.

"A dust explosion, huh...?"

Oh... That thing I used to hear about on the news when lightning struck factories filled with flour...

Lou and Miyu had managed to use defensive magic at the last second, so luckily, nobody was harmed. But everyone's hair in the room, young and old, had turned into an afro. Matt, who was proud of his mohawk, was crying in anguish that his style was ruined.

"You can just...give her S-rank already..." muttered the afro-headed King Gilbert, gazing into the distant mountain range.

"You're right... We can't measure her power any more..." sighed a very fluffy-haired Ziek.

"No objections..."

The rest of the afroed audience agreed, at a loss. S-rank required unanimous approval.

“Sere? Uhh... Congrats?” Lou’s fur had evolved into an even more voluminous form.

“Congrats, Miss Sere...?” Miyu’s thin azure beard and mane were all curly.

My brother and I looked just like the black thunder god from tales in my past life. The similarly electrified Lara charged us eight million gold to repair the roof.



I'd finally reached the top of the adventurer stack—I was the owner of an S-rank platinum plate at Trundle Guild.

So why couldn't I feel genuinely happy about it?



As the master of Trundle, I gathered as many people together as possible at the end of the year at the burnt remains of the mansion and had a campfire party. We barbecued some food that we'd hunted and gathered from the mountain, and Matsuki, who had recovered from his injury, took care of the cooking. We all gave thanks for the prosperity our domain had enjoyed up to now and prayed for it to continue into the future; both the young and the old raised our muscles as one!

I hadn't yet gotten around to greeting the people of the domain who weren't from the guild (like the lumberjacks, the bakers, and the housewives), but they all still accepted me as their master thanks to the groundwork my grandmother had laid.

"That's to be expected!" Lara giggled. "Everyone's seen you running around Trundle doing your hellish training since you were little!" She petted my head like she'd missed me as she munched on a sweet potato tart.

My brother had managed to dig up a weird black spherical fossil and auctioned it for a hundred million gold. With that, he'd paid off both our portions of the loan, bringing Lara back to her usual cute-big-sister self. *Thanks, brother! And thanks, fossil geeks!*

Later, at the beginning of the year, I was summoned to Galé to stand next to Gillain and receive greetings from the nobles who came to wish us well in the new year. Since Gillain was stone-faced, I gave myself a stomachache being sociable for the both of us, but Asu found it worthwhile to show himself and wrapped me in his wings, which made me more comfortable.

"This is an event worth celebrating!" Regueid kept announcing whenever we heard cheering nearby. I hadn't missed being annoyed by him.

Tabuchi and Yamada came from the friendly nation Marsche to give their new

year's greetings. It was a hectic but refreshing experience to hear about what our friends from Marsche and Regan Island had been up to, check on how the Nirva Orphanage was being run, and revitalize both Arthur and the kids who had been living on easy street after losing their tough director.

Gillain was always spending time with me at the Twilight Palace.

I had two platinum plates at my chest now—one of mine and one of Gillain's. I imbued one of the two Trundle platinum plates with my magic and gave it to Gillain, so he also had two now. We matched perfectly. As I gazed at those plates, hesitant and afraid of the future, Gillain made me promise to spend the new year in his arms.

Once Lou and I had finished what we needed to do, we went back to the Granzeus domain to revert back to just a normal girl and a silly fluffball and get spoiled by my father, my brother, Enrique, and Martha.

"Miss! Matsuki's been working hard pounding mochi all morning! Do you want red bean paste or roasted soy flour?" Martha asked.

Matsuki had finally made it to mochi!

"I'll take one of each!" I replied.

"I want chocolate!"

"You want chocolate, Lou? That's original..." my brother remarked. "Can I ask for some Marschean soy sauce, Martha?"

"Let's go give out presents to the children once we're done eating," my father suggested. "They've been looking forward to it. They're already lined up waiting at Mammoth Park."

"In this snow? We have to hurry, father!" I insisted.

"Aghh!" *Hack! Cough!*

"Lou, did you get the mochi stuck in your throat?" my brother asked.

"Oh, Lou, you dummy!" I chided him. "Get him some water, Martha!"

Matsuki had started packing us lunches that didn't just taste amazing but even replenished our stamina and magic.

“Matsuki... You’d do all this for my sake...?” The emotionally unshakeable holy beast cried.



And so, it was time...for my fateful seventeenth birthday! It had been about ten years since I’d last been to the magic academy. I remembered my father and grandmother taking me there by the hand like it was yesterday. This was where I met my beloved Gillain during my beloved brother’s tournament match. I’d also reunited with Schneider here before he became a threat.

“Sere, I don’t think it’s a bad thing that we’re settling things here. If the time and place are the same, then we can find out once and for all if you’ll be condemned or betrayed in this life. If not for this opportunity, you would live in fear of Maribelle for as long as she was alive.”

“Lou... You’re right.”

Both in the book and in this life, we had no choice but to settle things here.

In Galé, when we celebrated the new year, Asu discreetly told me, “Lou told me his weak points.”

“Why...?”

“He asked me to kill him if it comes to that.”

If it comes to that... As in, if he fell into Maribelle’s trap. He had resisted it last time by ripping off his own paw. We didn’t know if he would be able to resist this time. Maribelle was an unknown variable.

Holy beasts never showed weakness, even to a trusted friend. *Lou...*

“If you kill Lou, I’ll follow him.” It was my only choice.

“And leave Gillain behind?”

“...”

“Don’t worry, Sere. I won’t let a friend die without helping first.”

“...”

“I just wanted you to know how serious Lou is. Trust him.”

“Let’s go, Sere.” Lou growled from my shoulder. I pressed his forehead against my own, unifying our minds. His pure magic calmed my heightened emotions. I walked toward the stadium.

Miyu was deep in my chest pocket, just like last time—my top-secret wave cannon. Asu was high in the sky. All three holy beasts had strong illusion magic on them. If they were noticed, I wanted it to be as late as possible, although I didn’t know if I would be able to trick Schneider and Maribelle.

I saw people scattered throughout the audience, probably the same people who had watched the previous scene in the castle.

Since I’d judged that this stadium match would be dangerous, I only let my very inner circle of strong people come: my father and brother, Ziek, Gil, and Elise. I gave them each a black cloak that covered them from head to toe that I’d cast reflective and defensive magic on so the enemy wouldn’t be able to tell who was who. There was no way I’d come without countermeasures prepared, since I’d had so much time.

I was hoping that Maribelle’s spell would only activate when she spotted someone, but based on Lou’s experience, there was a chance that it would work on anyone who was a character in *Wild Rose*.

But regardless, I was going to protect my friends. For my guards who would show their faces, I picked the good pair of Kodak and Sasara, since they had nothing to do with *Wild Rose* or Maribelle. I revealed Lou’s existence to both of them, and both of us cast defensive magic on them.

Sasara was shocked, but then she understood why the members of the shrine knelt to me, and Elise was excited when she revealed she could see Lou. Sasara was a saint, after all, so she would be able to see my fluffball in no time if she trained her magic.

Kodak, of course...knew everything already. He knelt to Lou again and vowed his loyalty. In return, Lou gave him, of all things, one of Matsuki’s specialty chocolate-flavored meal bars!

“I mean, he’s been protecting you all this time, Sere.”

Kodak clutched the chocolate bar at a loss, having received the greatest thanks from Lou.

The three of us looked the same as before, but our outfits were completely remade with defensive and magic-protection magic in the threads.

I'd also embroidered Lou on my right arm, to add to the Trundle crest on my back and the Galé crest on my left arm. Lou had rejected the design over and over. Now I looked like I was wearing one of those long school jackets that old-timey delinquents wore. *I might cry if Schneider notices the resemblance and laughs at me.*

The three of us and Lou stood on the eastern side of the field, almost like the eastern army in the battle of Sekigahara.

"Master of Trundle! Doesn't your blood run red too? Don't you love this kingdom? Do you think nothing of hurting our beautiful Judore?"

Suddenly, a light shone from the heavens onto the western side of the field. It illuminated Maribelle, with her hands folded as if she were praying to God and her eyes sparkling. The heroine had made her appearance!

"Maribelle! Don't stand there! It's dangerous!"

"You're so pure, Maribelle..."

Two male students supported her from either side.

"Please, don't stop me! This is my destiny... I will create a world without conflict!"

Her lovely voice rang out like a bell. *Finally... I meet you face to face, Maribelle.*

This was the person who had cast a shadow on my heart ever since that fateful day when I was three. I'd tried my hardest not to be involved in her life, yet she'd tormented me and my loved ones at every turn. She held my life and death in her hands.

She had a cute face with round, pink eyes, a small upturned nose, and lips like flower petals. Her fluffy pink hair was pulled back with a hairband but was

otherwise loose. She appeared the complete opposite to my plain colors.

The two deluded boys in school uniforms at her sides were the remaining targets, the marquis's son Cain and the younger dog Harry. I almost felt for them, having to attend to Maribelle.

Maribelle's special pink uniform made me cringe. The fact that that was allowed at all, though, meant that she really did have this world under her thumb, which pained me to think about.

Appraisal! She shone red.

Maribelle (Protagonist of *I Love You, My Wild Rose*, magic academy student)

Status: Cursed (backfired)

Skills: All magic, reincarnated, Autopilot (lessened effect from curse), beloved by the gods

Cain shone blue.

Cain Duel (Marquis's son, magic academy student)

Status: Charmed

Skills: Fire magic, wind magic

Autopilot... Does that mean things automatically go her way without her planning it? I hoped that the targets were limited to characters from *Wild Rose*.

The fact that she was shining red meant that her deeds up until now had been carried out knowing full well they were hurting people. She couldn't claim that she didn't have bad intentions. If I took her as the airhead she appeared to be, it would mean my death.

She took what she wanted, even if it meant hurting others, just like with the lesser dragon.

She killed those who got in their way, even if it wasn't for the greater good, like with my grandmother.

She was the heroine, after all.

I noticed that “charmed” showed up for Cain, whom my Appraisal had included since he was sticking so close to Maribelle. Had the word “charmed” shown up in my appraisal because that was what I’d been calling it?

“Lou?” I took a deep breath and looked into his eyes.

“I’m fine for now, Sere. My heart is calm enough that I could laugh. I can’t believe what I did last time.” Lou pressed his face into my neck as if he was ashamed to remember it.

“Maribelle hasn’t noticed you yet, right?”

“Yeah...but she has a ton of magic. Don’t let your guard down.”

I looked up at my cloaked father and brother sitting in the audience. My father winked at me as if to tell me he was fine. My brother looked normal. I felt like crying from relief with my biggest concern out of the way.

My brother grinned and waved to me, just like I’d done to him at that magic tournament so long ago.

“What’s that girl talking about? Isn’t she the one who sent fire at the city?”

“Isn’t she embarrassed to make such a scene?”

“She has makeup over it, but half her face is black. I guess it’s from the curse that she set on Erza backfiring.”

The whispers of my guardians and onlookers in the audience were clearly audible in the quiet space.

“H-Hey, shouldn’t you all be supporting me? Looking at me with respect? And you’re all wearing dark hoods! So suspicious!”

As Maribelle complained, someone stood up from a red seat in the audience. It was Gardner, the second prince. He looked gaunt, with no trace left of his innocent boyishness. Cecil stood behind him, a protective glint in his eye. Behind Cecil was...the lovely Isabella? She was wringing her hands, her eyes wide. *Why is she in such a risky place?!*

It’s because she’s worried about her beloved prince, of course... I couldn’t

guarantee that I could protect the royal family too. *Be responsible for them, Cecil.*

“Oh, Gardner! Please, stop this fight! Don’t hurt anyone for my sake! Let’s find a way for you and Schneider to get along! We can talk this out!”

That wasn’t going to fly with Gardner...not after he’d been betrayed by his beloved Maribelle and had had everything stolen from him by his brother.

“Lou, can you tell Terl to tell Schneider to stop this charade? It’s getting on my nerves.”

“Terl isn’t in his right mind. I don’t think I can communicate... Wait, I have a connection. Schneider says, ‘Super sorry!’”

“That ‘super’ ticks me off.”

“Let’s join hands and work together to punish Trundle!” Maribelle was holding her hand out to Gardner in the audience.

What happened while I wasn’t listening?

“My brother killed our mother... Why should I join hands with him?” Gardner asked with no inflection. He wasn’t charmed...maybe because of the kick in the head?

No, anyone would be able to maintain their conviction after having their mother killed and their father kidnapped. Cecil, too, had only hurt and frustration in his eyes.

“W-Well, the queen killed Schneider’s mother too, right? So it’s even! And that queen was super annoying when I was after you too!”

“Just because my mother killed someone didn’t make it okay to take justice into his own hands. She should have had a trial under the impartial saint. Do you think it’s okay to take a life for a life? Weren’t you just saying we should talk things over?”

“It’s no big deal if a bad person dies! She’s an exception!” Maribelle pouted and put her hands on her hips.

“And why should we punish Trundle, anyway? Trundle has maintained neutrality for many years, governed its territory well, paid all its taxes, and

stayed loyal to the kingdom. What's more, Lady Erza is the hero who led us to victory in the last war. You must have learned in history class that our current peace is thanks to Lady Erza's strategy. You set a curse on someone who everyone looks to with respect and tried to kill her. This conflict is because of you. You instigated a war and now you're calling Trundle evil? I don't understand you at all anymore. Cecil was right." Gardner had apparently had plenty of time to think things over. He'd always been overly obedient, but he wasn't stupid.

Maribelle raised her voice. "Trundle is evil! I mean, I'm the heroine, and they chained me up in a prison cell for days! They even ruined my meeting event with the holy beast. Didn't you come here today to join my side, Gardner?"

"I came because I was worried about my kidnapped father."

"Oh, the king! He's asleep in bed after what the queen did to him, the poor thing. It just breaks my heart."

"You didn't think to help the king, a person who's being held captive as bait to draw Trundle out? Weren't you proud of your light magic? Didn't you think to use it to protect his dignity?"

In the novel, she'd used this rare kind of magic to heal her wounded friends. It was a rule-breaking (?) magic that far surpassed healing magic. It could even regenerate missing limbs. There shouldn't have been any teachers at the academy who could teach light magic, so where had she learned it? She would be a tough enemy if she had it mastered.

"Huh? Why me? I'm busy, you know? Jeez, nobody's acting according to their character..."

Enough. I shot a glare at Cecil, who was always conscious of me in some part of his mind. He quickly saluted me and stood up in front of the prince to be his shield.

I steeled myself for our first contact...although I was scared. I slowly approached Maribelle. *Come on, Serephione, you got this!*

"Oh? It's the villainess, Serephione! Why are you here? Are you with Trundle?" Maribelle pointed at me, her pink eyes wide.

“Good day. I see you know who I am. Would you mind telling me about yourself?”

“I-I’m Maribelle. I’m a fourth year at this magic academy! Wait... I don’t even know where to begin describing myself! Anyway, I’m working together with Schneider to turn this kingdom into one overflowing with love!”

The audience whispered. How was one student supposed to change a whole kingdom? Question marks floated above everyone’s heads.

“Are you representing Schneider? What do the students of the academy want with us? In any case, based on what you said before, you’re the one who attacked our beloved former master Erza, the mother of all the people of Trundle. I admire your courage to stand before me.”

“Well, yeah! Something was wrong with that old lady. She ruined my chance to get a holy beast! Of course I cursed her!”

Everything except the part where I praised her had gone right out her other ear.

“I can’t understand you in the slightest. Well, so be it. I was challenged by your side, fair and square. I came here to fight, and I’m going to avenge Erza and get the king back. Here goes!”

“W-Wait! There’s a scene first where my friends defend me as the cute heroine and fight in my place! Right, Cain, Harry!”

Maribelle’s happy allies stood in front of her.

“I’ll protect Maribelle!”

“Maribelle, stay back!”

Kodak stood in front of me. “So, if we defeat these two, we can have the king back?”

“Of course! But they’re both strong, you know! I doubt some old man can stand a chance!”

“You’re telling the truth? Let’s go, then!”

Kodak instantly closed in on the two and knocked them out with a lariat. Sighs

of exasperation—or perhaps it was resignation—sounded throughout the audience.

“Now, give him back!” Kodak roared.

“Noooo! Cain! Harry! How come the plot isn’t going like it should?! I’m setting it up so clearly... But I guess I can just beat you myself and make it a happy end? Okay, the real deal starts now! You can have the king back if you beat me!”

“You’ll give him back, will you? A student without a single accomplishment to her name treating the king as her personal property... How strange. And are you really going to keep your word? You went back on it just now, didn’t you? Are you going to tell us we have to beat Schneider next?”

“Ugh, I’ve had it with you! There’s no way I can lose, anyway! Schneider, you’ll keep your promise to me, right?” Maribelle turned to the western entrance of the field.

Schneider was leaning against the entrance... He’d apparently been there the whole time. I wasn’t sure if he’d been casting illusion magic on himself and Terl or on us, but he’d escaped my notice.

He slowly approached Maribelle and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “How could I refuse a request from my lovely Maribelle?”

“Schneider! You understand this story better than anyone!” Maribelle wrapped her arm around Schneider’s waist.

Having done exactly as Maribelle wished, Schneider slumped his shoulders at us. It irritated me.

“So, Schneider, is it true that we can have the king back if we win against this young lady?”

Schneider’s face shifted slightly at my words. “I’ve never lied before, Serephione. Lies and betrayal are what *she* did best, and what I despise the most.”

It was true that he hadn’t told any lies. His appraisal had come back blue, after all. His out-of-the-ordinary behavior was always serious. I resolved myself to fight both Maribelle and Schneider.

“Ahh, finally, this is how I thought things would turn out! Let’s get that villainess!” Maribelle was cupping her hands around her mouth like a loudspeaker, shouting in a cute voice like an idol from our previous life. She bent both her knees and jumped.

“Stop right there. Serephione has no need to participate in this despicable battle with the king held hostage.”

A cool voice resounded throughout the stadium. Elise pulled down her hood and stepped out from the audience onto the field in a dignified manner, her jet-black hair in a ponytail. Maribelle sneered.

“Who are you?”

“I am a saint, one who has offered her life itself to the gods. I have a question for you as well. What is this ‘heroine’ you’ve been mentioning?”

“The heroine is...the protagonist of this world. She does good things, and everyone likes her, and she gets a happy ending! As the heroine, I have to stop this war and bring peace to the kingdom!”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“Huh? By talking it over, of course?”

“This discussion is already over. Much blood has been shed. How do you expect to appease people who are furious over their families being killed by talking to them?” Elise explained things patiently as if she were talking to a child, pointing out Maribelle’s logical failings.

“Um, money?”

“That’s a good idea. So, are you rich?”

“I-I’m a student. Of course I’m not rich! I’m gonna use Schneider’s money!”

“I hate to tell you this, but I don’t believe Prince Schneider has much personal wealth.”

“Of course he does! He’s a prince!”

“The royal family doesn’t necessarily have money. The money belongs to the

kingdom. And that money is taxed from the people. It isn't something that Schneider, much less you, can use as you like."

"Well, I'm doing good things with it! Stop talking already!" Maribelle screeched.

Elise's temple twitched. "I think *you* should stop talking. You have interfered in the affairs of the country and conspired with Prince Schneider to move the national army when you have not yet completed your studies or entered the workforce. The temple, in its role as a mediator of peace, cannot overlook this. Part of the responsibility falls on you. You must be prepared to compensate for what you've done up to this point and use your abilities to make good on your word to stop this war and bring peace."

"I said shut up!"

Bladelike winds shot from Maribelle. Kodak and I drew our swords and blocked them.

Wind was a high-level type of magic. Maribelle should have used a lot of magic already, but she didn't appear tired at all.

"Thank you, Serephi. Let's punish this girl for her thoughtless, immature behavior." Elise drew her sword from her waist. It was slender and divine-looking, with fine engravings on the silver. *A temple sword?* It was imbued with magic. I was seeing her samurai form for the first time since she'd graduated. *But I can't let her fight herself!*

"What do we do, Lou?"

"Elise wants to fight for you. Let's accept her desire. If her life is in danger, we can intervene for her."

I looked at Schneider, whose arms were folded, leaning against the wall. He was poised on the sidelines.

"I think I'll have to fight Maribelle myself if I want to change the fate of *Wild Rose*," I said to Lou.

"I hate to put it like this, but Elise is your pawn," Lou replied. "This is no different from you fighting. It's a favor from Elise. We can have Maribelle show

us her hand this way and jump in if Elise loses.” Lou nibbled my neck and sent his pure magic into me to calm me down.

“Elise is strong, Miss Sere! She has divine power on her side! She’ll be okay!” Since even Miyu agreed, I decided to take the favor from Elise and observe Maribelle. Knowledge is power!

I went to Elise’s side and clutched her hand.

“Speed!” I chanted, sending my original speed magic into her. She would be able to move on the tone of my voice for a short time—in other words, at the speed of sound. The look in her eyes showed me how amused she was.

“I imagine it will get in your way somewhat, but please keep your cloak on, saint.”

Elise nodded quietly. “I’m used to fighting in outfits that are hard to move in. I vow to bring victory to Saint Serephione!”

“So, you’re going to fight instead of the villainess? Okay, bring it on! And what does saint mean, anyway? That role should go to me!” Maribelle took out a golden wand from her waist with a sparkling spherical tip.

“I’ll fight for peace in Judore! Here goes!” Maribelle clutched her wand in both hands and pointed it at the sky.

“Goddess in heaven, come to me...” Elise closed in at blinding speed, her black cloak fluttering behind her, and swung the sword in her right hand right at Maribelle’s stomach!

It was a hit with the back of the sword, but it landed cleanly. Maribelle’s stomach had been wide open, after all.

Maribelle went flying and slammed into the wall. Elise remained in a low stance with her sword in her right hand, watching Maribelle carefully without going after her. Maribelle hadn’t defended at all.

“Oww... That... That really hurts! I can’t believe you’d just attack me like that...” She glared at Elise with annoyance, then muttered something and got back up immediately.

“She healed,” said Lou.

Maribelle was completely unhurt. Her healing magic was just that powerful. *Can I defeat her by pummeling her so quickly she has no time to heal, or is my best shot at victory to knock her out cold with one blow?*

“I’m not letting you get away with that... Schneider, bring out Terlnight!”

Huh?

“Maribelle... I don’t remember confirming with you that I’m working with Terlnight.”

“Just bring him out! The holy beasts are all on my side, after all!”

“She’s yelling Terl’s true name in front of the public?” Asu’s voice from above was tinged with irritation.

“Fine... Go ahead, Terlnight.”

In the next moment, ice dust sparkled next to Maribelle, then condensed and took shape.

Terl had made a second appearance.

“The holy beast of the north...” My brother’s murmur reached my ears. This was the being my brother had been looking for. My father and the other few who could see him were shocked.

“Terlnight! Crush that girl!” Maribelle glared at Elise. An overwhelming wave of fear came from Terl.

Elise staggered and lowered her sword out of the strength of her faith, gazing wordlessly at Terl.

She had no chance of winning now that Terl had come out. I went to step forward so Elise could retreat.

“Let me go out there, Miss Sere.” Miyu crawled out from my pocket. Her voice was quiet, but I could tell she was angry. We spoke as we both glared at Maribelle and Terl.

“But Terl is really strong. He half-killed me before.”

“I know. I was watching.”

“You know what’ll happen if you fight Terl, right? It’s taboo.”

“I know! But what kind of girl would I be if I wasn’t willing to help Elise anyway?”

I couldn’t stop Miyu if she was that determined, since she was a heavenly beast. “Are you going to go support her?”

“I’m gonna go all out!”

Elise was an actress, after all.

Lou sighed. “All right, then. Show Terl the bond we have with our contractor!” He released the illusion magic on Miyu.

Miyu transformed into her full size, spraying water forcefully. She was even larger than the last time I’d seen her, her azure body sparkling luminously. She landed at Elise’s left side.

The whole area was enveloped in clean air. Those who could see her were terrified at the sight, and those who couldn’t felt the crisp air on their skin and rubbed their arms.

Miyu gently supported Elise’s body and rubbed her long torso against her head. Elise drew in a breath, tears coming to her eyes.

“Beautiful...” Schneider let his genuine opinion out, his eyes sparkling.

“AZURE DRAGON? KILAMA...? NO...” Terl looked at his junior.

“I’m not gonna let you get away with being mean to my girls, old man! Kilama was super angry about it too! So cowardly!”

Terl appeared confused.

“Is Terl male?” I asked. Holy beasts had no inherent sex, with Miyu being an exception since she was born in this land and later became a holy beast.

“I don’t know, but no woman would let you get away with calling her an old man, Miyu...”

“Is that a dragon? For real? This really is a fantasy world! Come to me, now! I’m Maribelle! I’ve finally met a holy beast other than the turtle! Turtles are so boring.” Maribelle’s eyes sparkled as she held out a hand to Miyu.

Of course she can see her without the illusion magic...

“You think I would ever take your hand, with that dirty black curse on you?!”
Miyu sent a wave of anger out!

“Eek!” Maribelle fell backward. Terl moved behind her to keep her from hitting the wall. “Wh-Why? The holy beasts are all on my side! I know, you’re being controlled! Don’t worry, I’ll help you!”

“They’re not communicating well.”

“She can’t hear us without being contracted.”

“I’m sick of you!” Miyu shot bullets of water! Maribelle and Terl were soaked.

Miyu instantly enveloped Elise in a thin veil of water and wrapped it vigorously around the holy sword she held in her hands. Miyu then swung her tail and created a pillar of water at Elise’s feet, and after placing her on it, she stretched it high into the sky in a swirling motion. Elise swung her sword from the apex of the water tower, and razor-like blades of water rained down on Maribelle and Terl with pinpoint accuracy!

“Terlnight, protect me!”

Terl stepped in front of Maribelle to protect her from the water razors with his shell. He was an iron fortress, as always.

“Lightning against water! Go!” Maribelle shot off an advanced lightning attack without an incantation!

“I’ll never let you use lightning magic on me!” Miyu would never forget the attack her father had faced. She instantly threw up a meter-thick wall of water between herself and Maribelle. Maribelle’s lightning hit the wall and fell to the earth.

“Why didn’t it go through?!” Maribelle yelled in confusion.

“I get it,” Lou said.

“How did that work, Lou?”

“It’s pure water. Water without any impurities doesn’t conduct electricity.”

“It doesn’t?”

“And the reason she can make pure water so easily is because she’s a holy

beast. Normal water usually has some kind of impurity, so it conducts electricity. Good thinking, Miyu.”

Good job, Miyu! You must have trained hard with Renza. Miyu had reflection magic on her, so she should have been able to bounce the attack back, but Elise was also there.

Maribelle repeatedly attacked with fire, earth, and water, but none of the attacks could pierce Miyu’s wall of pure water. The four elements and healing... She wasn’t using any magic except for what she’d been taught in school.

She hadn’t created any new kinds of magic like Schneider and I had. That showed just how easy she’d had it in this life—she hadn’t been in a situation where she’d needed any.

Miyu blew a purple cloud from her mouth! Poison mist!

“Aaah!” Maribelle hacked and wheezed in the miasma. And Terl’s movements slowed as he was surrounded by the mist! The poison worked because it was from a fellow holy beast.

Elise plunged rapidly from the sky, aiming at Terl’s neck with her water-coated sword spinning at high speed! Terl, unable to move as usual because of the poison, retracted his head into his shell.

The tip of Elise’s sword just barely made contact! Terl’s legs weakened. She’d done damage to him. On the rebound, she slashed from Maribelle’s right shoulder to her solar plexus!

Bam! It was a hit with the back of the sword, but Maribelle cowered.

“Ugh... How do your attacks keep hitting me? I’m the strongest student at the magic academy! Why is Terlnight so weak?”

Of course, Terl wasn’t weak. They just weren’t cooperating.

Maribelle muttered something and detoxified herself. But she wasn’t using it on Terl...only herself. That was why she wasn’t strong enough. Terl probably could regenerate, but it would be more efficient to use detoxifying magic than to wait for that to kick in. It would be fatal for the key defender to move poorly, after all.

Isn't it just the normal thing to do to heal a battle partner if you have the ability, anyway?

“There’s no such thing as partners in her world. There’s only herself and underlings. The heroine and the small fry.”

In contrast, Elise and Miyu had perfect coordination! They weren’t contracted, so they couldn’t communicate with words, only with eye contact.

I could see how much they trusted—no, how much they loved each other. They were real partners.

“How about you give up soon?” Elise called to Maribelle in a cold voice.

“I’m the heroine! I can’t lose! You’re supposed to act like you did in *Wild Rose*!”

Maribelle stood up. Some kind of black mass rose up from her body, and a chill ran down my spine.

“It’s a curse!” Asu shouted from above. The heavenly beasts wouldn’t let evil near them—but Elise was too close!

Elise was immediately surrounded by the black mass.

“Ah...” Elise’s face turned pale white, and she fell to her knees.

“Elise!”

“Elise!” Miyu’s eyes shone! But...

“This curse is tough... Oh, no...”

I could tell Miyu was struggling.

“You...!” Lou glared at Maribelle from my shoulder. But...I saw no change.

“Maribelle! Didn’t you want a peaceful resolution?” I shouted. “Are you going to kill her? She only hit you with the back of your sword! It wouldn’t be fair!”

“Shut up! Background characters who interfere with me deserve to die anyway!”

Maribelle’s makeup peeled off, perhaps reacting to her own curse, which appeared as an ugly black color on her face.

“Maribelle... Why don’t you just call it a win for you and end this?” said Schneider.

“Of course not! She’s been preaching at me all high and mighty, and she hurt my shoulder! I’m not letting her go!”

Elise quietly collapsed to the ground.

“Elise!”

Suddenly, a beam of light shot from below Elise into the heavens!

There was one behind us too! Lou and I turned to see the source...Sasara’s left hand!

They were Alma’s gold rings! The magic I’d used on them was set to release electricity when one of our lives was in danger of being snuffed out.

Elise was on the verge of death, and Sasara’s pain at seeing her one and only best friend hurt was enough to bring Sasara herself near death, so they both activated.

The two pillars soared high into the sky, twisted together, and came back to earth at breakneck speed. Then they became one big spear and fell straight down onto Maribelle!

“Aaaaaaah!”

The shining white spear pierced Maribelle and pinned her to the ground. As soon as the strength left her body, the light dissipated.

“Elise!” Sasara came running from behind me with a furious look on her face, and I followed. Sasara lifted the collapsed Elise onto her lap, not paying any mind to the black curse surrounding her.

“Elise! Elise!”

Sasara removed the cloak around Elise’s neck and pressed on her chest to encourage her to start breathing. She smacked Elise’s curse-blackened face a few times, and then she cried and held Elise while pressing their cheeks together.

“Come on, Elise! Open your eyes!”

The stadium was filled with screams.

“What was I thinking...?”

I’d made an error in judgment. Maribelle was shining red, so I should have known she would be unpredictable. I’d almost lost my grandmother to her curse!

“I failed to protect someone I love again...”

Why did I let Elise go? I’m the villainess! Elise doesn’t have anything to do with this!

This is all because she got involved with me! I’m the one who changed her fate!

“It’s...my fault...”

I’d been too prideful to think I could save her if it came down to it...that I could make it in time. I’d exposed Elise, someone many people needed, to danger. I’d stolen Elise from everyone.

“I should be the one to die...”

If only I’d accepted my fate according to the plot...

“Don’t say that, Sere...” Lou wrapped his tail around my neck.

“I’ll come down to earth. Let’s use my healing ability.” Asu’s magic approached.

“W-Wait! Asu! Miss Sere, Lou, look at Sasara!”

Everyone looked where Miyu told them to. Inside the black mass containing Elise and Sasara, there was one faint point of light like a firefly. *A heartbeat?*

“She needs more magic! Sere, give her some of yours!”

Hearing Asu raise his voice for once, I hastily put my hands together and sent magic toward Sasara’s light! Miyu stopped trying to remove the curse and added her own magic. Lou, instead of sending his magic to Sasara, nibbled my neck and replenished my magic; it felt even richer than before.

The faint, fuzzy light gradually gained strength. It went from a dot to a coin, then a coin to a ball, chasing away the darkness around it. When it finally

surrounded the two women, there was a sound like glass shattering, and the black mass was blown away! I assumed that included the part that had been inside Elise as well.

The black mass gathered itself up like it had with my grandmother, became an even larger sphere than that time, and flew right at Maribelle. It absorbed itself into Maribelle's stomach as she lay on the ground, and her skin turned even blacker.

I looked away from the repulsive sight and back to Sasara. Sasara, in her black Trundle uniform, stood up and fixed her loose hair while gently holding Elise in her pure white dress. Sasara was radiating a divine light.

Elise's body suddenly jerked, and she slowly opened her eyes!

"Sasara... You're as chivalrous as ever..."

"Elise... I always end up worrying about you..." Sasara sighed.

"She's been awakened as a saint," Lou muttered, looking directly at the two.

Asu's voice sounded from above as well. "She used the power to dispel evil to get rid of the curse. I'm impressed that she removed a curse that Miyu wasn't able to."

"Of course she would be awakened with magic from us holy beasts in her..." Lou noted. "Don't just go around giving magic to people you're not contracted with, Miyu!"

"B-But... Was that wrong of me, Miss Sere?" Miyu hung her head.

I shook my head. "Of course not. Thank you for helping Elise and Sasara, Miyu."

"Of course!" Miyu curled up and sprung onto Elise. Sasara's eyes went wide from the shock of getting a kiss on the cheek from Miyu.

Right, Sasara can probably see Miyu now that she's received Miyu's magic. She might even be able to hear her.

I slumped down, and Kodak supported my waist.

"Thank goodness..." A tear rolled down my cheek. I lowered my head so

nobody would see.

Elise had made it out alive. I was glad that she was okay, of course, but I was also relieved that I hadn't made a huge mistake. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to carry that heart-crushing guilt. It was *me* that had been saved.

I'm...so selfish. Elise fought for my sake, but all I can think about is myself.

No more mistakes. I won't let anyone I care about stand in front of me again. If anyone's going to be hurt, it's going to be me!

"I feel powerless whenever you're hurt," I remembered Gillain saying. I finally understood how he felt.

I have to talk to Schneider... I'll protect everyone else from getting hurt...

Kodak came up to me as I gazed in thought at Elise, Sasara, and Miyu. He wiped my tear away with his thumb.

"You don't have to fight alone, Miss. You can depend on me. I'm your teacher, you know."

"..."

"We all love you just as much as you love us. It's not your fault you made an error in judgment. You trust us enough to give us information, so we all understand what you're thinking. And if we succeed, it's thanks to all of us working together."

I remembered my brother saying something similar recently, but...

"Not even Erza fought on her own. A master's job is to use their allies well. You'd do well to listen to your elders, Serephione."

I looked up at Kodak.

"You believed in Elise. Elise teamed up with Sasara based on your trust and got results. What should you do as master?"

"I should...believe in them," I replied. "Appreciate them. Thank them."

Kodak ruffled my hair.

"Being together is the best part of life! That's what being young is all about! Get over there!" He pushed me from behind. Uneasiness still in my heart, I

stood up straight in a way that befit a master and went over to Elise, Sasara, and Miyu.

“Thank you, Saint Elise, Sasara, and heavenly beast of the east. I’ll never forget what you did today. Please let me take care of the rest and take some time to recover.”

“But Serephi, I’m your guard...”

I shook my head. I couldn’t have a saint as my guard.

Elise stood up out of Sasara’s embrace and knelt to me. “I wish you good fortune in battle, Saint Serephione.”

Elise should have been entirely out of stamina and emotional energy, but she managed to give me a smile. I really was no match for a saint.

I used Appraisal on the unconscious Maribelle just to be safe. She shone red.

Maribelle (Protagonist of *I Love You, My Wild Rose*, magic academy student)

Status: Unconscious, weakened by curse (backfired)

Skills: All magic, reincarnated, Autopilot (lessened effect from curse), beloved by the gods

Now that she’d taken such strong backfired curses, there was no way she could continue to act as she had before. *Maybe one day she’ll even be able to lift curses this heavy, but she’s not there yet.*

“That concludes the fight. Now give back the king,” Ziek said loudly to Schneider from the stands, as if Schneider were only a disruptive kid to him.

“You’re right. In a bit, then.”

“Now.”

Schneider furrowed his brows. “Isn’t that a little hasty?”

“Cut the crap. I don’t believe anything you’re saying, unlike our master. Give him back now. According to our master, you stole him in an instant. You could

do the same now.”

Schneider slumped his shoulders, closed his eyes, and said an incantation.

Terl landed once again with a loud thump, and the king was on his back, wrapped in a blanket with his eyes closed. Terl used wind magic like a cushion to gently bring the king to the ground. He didn’t seem injured from afar.

“Father!” Gardner yelled as he broke into a run toward the stairs at the back end of the field. Gil also leaped from the stands and ran toward the king. He gently picked his younger brother up and ran a finger along his cheek. The king opened his eyes.

“I’m sorry... You can rest now,” said Gil to his brother with an empty look on his face. A tear fell from his uncovered eye.

“Sere.” Asu’s voice sounded in my head from above. “There are traces of healing magic having been used on him. Terl’s magic too. But it doesn’t look like any of it worked, unfortunately...”

“I see...”

Gil left, carrying the king, and Gardner and Cecil went after him.

I turned toward Schneider. “As you can see, the next king is your uncle Gilbert. Now that there’s no more battle for the throne, why aren’t you pulling out or negotiating?”

“Would you pull out after I tried to kill your former master?”

“If that was in the people’s best interest.”

“I could attack someone close to you again.”

“...”

“You’re not on my side,” he said as if admonishing me for my naivete.

I’d honestly thought that if he would just bow down to me, I could think of some way to put him in his place other than fighting him. Still, at this point, my friends and family wouldn’t assent to anything but beating Schneider into a pulp.

“So, tell me again... What do you want from me if you win, Serephione?”

“I want you to lay down your arms and swear a pact of nonaggression toward me, my friends and family, and Trundle. Make me believe what you said about not lying to me again. If Maribelle attacks us again, stop her yourself.”

“This means the only way to end this is for you and Sere to fight,” Lou said.

“Good insight... Lou of the west, was it? Speaking of which, the heavenly beast of the east has been sticking close to you. I’m surprised she’s with you and not the saint. That makes three holy beasts I’m up against...” Schneider smiled wryly. Now that he knew about Miyu, there was no point in keeping the illusion on.

“So, it’s been two and a half years.”

Schneider took a red rose from his chest, enjoying the scent.

“Show me how much you’ve grown, Serephione.”

Chapter 6: Battle with Schneider

Schneider took a wand from his chest and waved it twice. A huge snowstorm began to rage between the field and the stands!

“What are you doing?!”

“I thought I’d ask the audience members who can’t take the snow to leave. They’re in the way.”

It was too sudden for me...and I didn’t like his methods...but I had to agree. I didn’t want any of them to get hurt.

Terl came back up to Schneider. It seemed the poison had worn off. The two quietly walked to the center of the field.

I looked back to the stands to see everybody making a dash for the entrance away from the freezing cold.

“Kodak, guide them to somewhere safe. They’ll catch cold.”

“So, I’m just a burden on you too... Take care, Miss.” Kodak gently hugged me before jumping to the stands.

“Things are quiet now,” Lou noted.

A few minutes later, there were only three people left in the audience: my father, with his legs crossed; my brother, watching me with his face resting on his hand; and Ziek, who was rubbing his shoulders with his eyes closed. My father and brother apparently had a light magic veil around them. Ziek had used his tornado to blow away the snow. Absolutely no restraint.

I glanced at my father, and he nodded a little. He would protect Ziek for me. Kodak would likely come back when he finished his duty as well; he was my one and only teacher, after all. *Take good care of both of them, father.*

Lou jumped off my shoulder and glowed, turning to full size as soon as he landed on the ground. My magnificent holy beast lifted his head at my right

side, glaring at Schneider with a haughty air.

Just then, two huge magic presences fell from the sky with a flash of light! When the light subsided, I saw a full-sized Asu, his long trail of feathers hanging down, standing on the shoulder of his one and only, Gillain.

Asu called him...

“Of course,” Asu’s voice sounded in my head.

Gillain landed in the center of the stands, the sun shining behind him, and began to walk slowly toward the front row...toward the snowstorm. He was in his black military uniform, and his icy-blue eyes were scanning the stadium with what almost looked like nostalgia. Once he spotted me through the veil of snow, he shot Schneider an icy glare.

“Emperor Gillain... *You’re* here.” Schneider smiled defeatedly and stopped the snowstorm instantly. “You also look well, heavenly beast of the south.” Schneider knelt down as a proper greeting, then stood back up without getting a response. “You have a lot of guardians here, Serephone.”

“I’m popular.”

“Are you afraid you can’t beat me on your own?”

“I nearly died last time. Of course I’m going to use everything in my power now.”

“When are your companions going to jump in?”

“When I ask them to, I suppose.”

“We’ll beat you into the dust if you hurt Sere,” Lou growled. “But I don’t intend to let that happen. Not this time.”

“Lou... I would hate for that to happen. I care too much about myself for that. Right, Terlnight?” Schneider stroked Terl’s head.

I noticed that Terl’s eyes were actually brown. They weren’t as cloudy as before. That was a good thing for Terl...but it may not have been such a good thing for us.

“First Prince Schneider,” spoke Gillain in a low, grave voice. “I have no interest

in your future or the fate of this kingdom. However..." He gave me a sidelong glance. "Serephione belongs to me, and I will have no mercy on anyone who hurts her. I will use all of Galé's power to bring you and your kingdom to ash. Be warned."

Schneider's eyes were wide. "I thought you two were just engaged out of convenience since you both have holy beasts... You actually have feelings for each other? I'm surprised."

Yeah, we're tied together by a super thick red rope, so what? I desperately tried to stop my face from turning beet red, to no avail.

"Here we go!" Lou swirled sand up from the ground, hiding me and himself.

"Speed!" I made both of us faster. When I looked at Schneider and activated Map, I saw two red dots. With this, I would be able to keep track of Schneider and Terl.

The sand dancing in the air all grew hot at once—scalding sand. Lou spun it freely to surround us.

Schneider tried to blow the sand away with wind magic, but Lou's sand wasn't that weak.

I jumped up inside the sand and started to throw shurikens from above, ten at a time. My brother had taught me his trick to take them out from his Magic Room instantly.

I had paralyzing and sedating poison on each shuriken. Terl was deflecting them left and right, but each time, he was making contact with the poison. His movements were still agile, though. Maybe that meant the drugs I'd extracted from the nearby plants didn't work on him. He'd probably also developed resistance to Miyu's poison from before.

Lou came around to where I touched down. I got on his back, and we closed the distance between us and Terl at once. He shouldn't have been able to trace our motion visually. We circled behind Schneider and away from Terl, and I jumped off Lou's back again, taking my kunai from my wrist and aiming it right at Schneider's neck from above!

Of course, I mentally hesitated a bit...but I didn't want to see my loved ones hurt any more than I already had. I was finally going to get my hands dirty.

As I fell at high speed, Schneider looked up and spotted me. He took his rose from his chest, and the vine instantly stretched out and stole my kunai. Terl noticed me behind him, turned around, and tried to defend, but I cast paralysis on him using wind on top of the sand that Lou had hardened around his feet!

I obediently let go of my kunai, rotated in the air, and aimed a roundhouse kick at Schneider's face with my right leg. Schneider crossed his arms in front of his face to block. I swung my leg at full strength, sending him flying all the way into the wall!

I hadn't been even close to a match for him last time. I hadn't been able to break through Terl's defenses or land even one attack that did any damage to Schneider. But this time...I could do it!

Even denser sand assaulted Terl, who was far from Schneider now. Lou wasn't letting up on the offense. *I'm sorry you're committing a taboo for me again, Lou...*

I took my short lance from my hip, spiraled flame around it, and dashed at him at the speed of sound.

Schneider waved his wand as he braced himself. A gigantic wave of water, too big to avoid, came crashing down from the heavens! As I caught myself so I wouldn't be swept away in the current, Lou's sand all fell to the ground.

No! I leaped backward and returned to Lou.

"This is as much water as Lake Lelia." Lou shook the water off his fur. I used dryer magic on the both of us drowned rats, lightening our bodies.

"This is your chance, Sere. Don't give him an opening! Close in!"

"Okay!"

I put my short lance back in its sheath, used Lou as a stepping stone again, and leaped as high as I could. Then I used the lava that Asu had passed down to me! *Papa, brother, gramps, Gillain! Out of the way!* Lou jumped onto the wall separating the stands and the field.

I lifted my hands to the sky to concentrate my magic into them, then thrust them at Schneider on the ground below and shot burning magma directly at him. The unexpectedly smooth magma fell toward Schneider with perfect aim!

I can do this!

Just as the bright red magma was about to make contact, Terl stood in front of Schneider! I suddenly felt unbelievably heavy. I crashed down from the sky and fell to the ground.

“Serephione!” My brother ran to the very edge of the stands and leaned out. I saw his hood fall back, revealing his worried face.

This was...gravity. The pressure held me down. I deactivated the magma, since it didn’t work except when cast from above, and used strengthening magic, but it wasn’t enough. I was as flat as a squashed bug. My bones felt like they were about to break.

“Sere!” Lou sent out a blade of wind like a boomerang aimed at Terl.

So this gravity magic is Terl’s. I remembered when he had used meteorites before.

When the boomerang hit Terl, the gravity weakened, letting me take a deep breath again.

Schneider’d had enough time to heal now. I stretched my arms out and lifted my head. He lifted his body from the wall and waved his wand in a large up-down motion!

My entire field of vision was covered by blades of ice. He was several times more powerful now than last time!

“You’re on a completely different level than you were two years ago, Serephione. Talk about a growth spurt.”

You’ve gotten stronger too, you know. I can’t fit this much in my Magic Room...

“You may be my only kindred spirit in this world...” Schneider continued, “but you’re also the only person who could defeat me. I’ll be anxious as long as you’re alive.”

I wouldn't have to defeat you if you would just leave me alone!

"Aren't you going to call one of your helpers?" Schneider asked.

One—no, two—blades began to strike the ground like a summer rain. They were even falling near my brother and Gillain, who were near the field. *Watch out!* I mentally shouted.

"Bye... See you at the beer garden in our next lives." Schneider looked on with sad eyes.

Who are you...to act like this is over just because you say so?!

"I'm...not calling any helpers!" I screamed.

Do you realize how much pain and hard work I went through in my training? How much boring basic strength training I had to do? And in an unfamiliar place! I was being chased and attacked, and battling desperately with loneliness, and I still had faith that I could become stronger like Lou said!

"I've told you this before, but you're not the only one who's going through a hard time after being reincarnated!" I staggered to my feet and glared at Schneider. "I'll end this between us if it's the last thing I do! Miyu!"

Miyu jumped out of my pocket and grew to full size!

"It's time, Miyu!"

"Got it, Miss Sere!"

I gasped for breath, synchronized with Miyu, and pointed at the sky!

"Calcium chloride!" we both shouted.

Miyu made a torrent of seawater appear above our heads, as much water as Schneider had made before. I extracted the calcium chloride from the water with almost no time lag. Then I turned it into fine powder and sprayed it at the ice in the air!

This had been what they scattered on the roads in winter to melt the snow in my past life. I figured it was the only way to melt ice other than fire. Our timing was crucial to pull this off, but we'd just barely managed.

Schneider's ice slowly vanished.

“Why is the saint’s heavenly beast listening to your orders...?”

I had no obligation to answer him. *Thanks, Elise.*

I shook off Terl’s gravity with sheer willpower and made a dash for Schneider.

Miyu slithered up to Terl and wrapped around him, and Lou pushed Terl’s head down with a front paw. The gravity disappeared! As Schneider stood dumbfounded, I put all my weight on my left foot as I stepped forward...and punched him right in the face!

Thunk! Schneider went flying into the wall again with a strong impact.

I was breathing heavily, but with the gravity magic gone, I realized that I wasn’t hurt much. My brother’s earrings and Gillain’s plate had protected me.

Schneider propped himself up on an elbow, put a hand to his red, swollen cheek, and looked at me wordlessly.

“The fight is over. If you want to continue to whine, then you’ll have to face me.” Gillain shot a sharp glare at Schneider. Asu also flapped his rainbow wings and sent a gale of pure, paralyzing fear in Schneider’s direction.

“Serephione...you’re strong.” Schneider chuckled. “You’re stronger now.” He shook his head as if to clear it. “I can’t believe you’re able to order holy beasts around without making them your servants.”

“I don’t order them around!”

“True...so they’re volunteering to help you, then. Either way, I can’t believe it.”

He put his hands against the wall and slowly stood up...but his legs immediately gave out, and he collapsed back onto the ground.

“I had some other ideas to use against you, but I can’t keep up with your speed.” Schneider gazed into the sky...and smiled.

“It’s over. Finish me off, Serephione.”

Huh...? How can you just say that like it’s nothing? Was this your plan the whole time? Did you want to die? Do you feel so empty and disappointed that killing the queen didn’t bring things back to normal that you wanted to force my

hand into killing you? Or do you want to hurt me emotionally by making me kill someone who shares my past life in Japan?

No...he's not that sensitive enough to other people's feelings. He's just an idiot who was focused on nothing but keeping himself and his mother alive this time around.

Either way, it made me mad. I glared at Schneider and clenched my fist again.

"W-Wait!"

Someone ran up between me and Schneider...General Avenger! He'd been allowed to live.

"Serephione! Please, I beg of you, on my own life, please spare the prince!"

Terl began to shake. Miyu and Lou slowly released the paralysis on him, and he slid over to Schneider, hiding his master.

"Terl, you..." Lou's sky blue eyes were wide. Terl's amber eyes were clear and sparkling. This was his own will. He was protecting Schneider while in full control.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like I'm a murderer, General. Schneider was the one who chased me with the intent to kill in the first place. I ran away so I didn't have to face him, remember?"

"Th-That's true, but..."

"I never wanted to kill Schneider. Even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't anymore after hearing him ask to be killed. He wouldn't say that unless death would be the easier option for him...and I'm not letting him get off easy."

The general looked at both me and Schneider.

"Not to mention, Schneider, you're a background character! Who's supposed to benefit from the villainess and a background character fighting to the death?"

"But if you let me go, I could attack you again."

"I'm not letting you provoke me! I'm sick of this. Why should I involve myself in a battle without the heroine? I know...the next time you attack me, I'll sic my

fiancé on you. Right, Gillain?”

Gillain raised one eyebrow.

“What if I attack someone you love?” Schneider asked.

“The general’s job is to prevent that!” I looked over at him, and he nodded obediently.

“I’m going to let you live so that you can use your magic power to make up for all the hurt you’ve caused to other people until you die. Your uncle Gil, who has no grudge against you and went through the same hardships as you, will help you from the background.”

“Terl, you’ll lead him,” instructed Lou.

Schneider smiled wryly. “I’ll live and atone for my sins... How cruel of you, Serephione.”

“You’re going to live in repentance to the people who you involved in your personal vendetta. I’m being completely honest here. Also...you may have lost your mother, but you’re not alone.”

Schneider looked at the back of the man standing before him, then the turtle shell, and remained silent.

“I’ll be looking after you, as someone who shares your birthplace,” I reassured him.

Schneider sighed and gazed into the heavens, his back still against the wall.

“It’s over, Sere... Good job,” Lou said.

Miyu looked over at me. “Miss Sere...”

So...it’s over? Schneider was strong, wasn’t he? But I was stronger than I thought too. Lou had powered up too, and most of all, Miyu supported me.

“It was inevitable that you would win, Sere. You put in a lot of work, of course, but you were also a child last time. You’ve grown in size in the past two years, and your capacity for magic has grown to match. You had more room to grow than Schneider. Miyu being here was also a huge plus. You’re strong, Sere. You won as you should have.” Lou said with a serious look in his eyes.

The red rose at Schneider's chest was completely dried out from the heat of Lou's sand and my magma.

I'd...made it through, right? I'd avoided the condemnation that was set for my seventeenth year?

Had I finally gotten...the peaceful life I'd almost resigned myself to never having?

"Larouza!" My father's piercing scream rang out.

A light shone from behind me.

"Oh, finally! Finally, you're here!"

Maribelle had recovered consciousness and pulled herself into a sitting position at the end of the field, her face entirely black.

Standing next to her and holding her hand tenderly to help her up...was my brother, Larouza.

"No..."

"Why...?"

I zigzagged my eyes to examine my brother in detail. The lapis lazuli necklace around his neck...was gone.

My brother turned around. His emerald eyes pierced me, coldly and quietly.

Chapter 7: Battle between My Two Loved Ones

I turned backward and looked up at my father. He had run up to the very front of the stands and was screaming my brother's name, his face white. I saw sunlight reflecting off of my brother's necklace in his hand.

"He lost his amulet..." Lou grimaced.

Had Schneider's ice attack grazed it? My brother wasn't hurt, since his defense was perfect, but the ice must have broken the chain...and then Maribelle woke up at the worst possible time and spotted him.

So, that necklace I made him really worked, ha ha... I wish I didn't have to find out this way.

I fearfully looked back at my brother. Maribelle stood up, clinging to him. All of her visible skin, not just her face, now looked ominously dull and black.

"Finally, Larouza, you're here! What took you so long? Where have you been all this time?"

"..."

"Everything went wrong because of your sister, the villainess, you know! The story is all messed up! Help fix this and crush her! Hurry!"

"Sere! Watch out!"

Lou ran over and pushed me out of the way just as a three-meter long arrow of lightning shot where I had been a moment before, crackling with electricity. It sliced my tied-back hair, which came undone and fluttered in the air.

My own brother...had just attacked me without moving.

"Appraisal!" Miyu shouted. He shone blue.

Larouza Granzeus (Heir to a count, S-rank adventurer, prodigy→sage, under protection of Loudarylphena and Miyu-geld)

Status: Charmed

Skills: Short lance, shuriken, one-handed sword, new magic, librarian, explorer, collector

It shows "charmed..."

"Sere! Stay focused! You have to do something about Larouza!"

"B-Brother! Brother! Brother! Brother!!!" I shouted with all my heart, trying to reach him.

Miyu's eyes flashed and she put up a wall of water in front of me! Immediately after, a spear of lightning fell on me again. The spear sank into the water.

Time seemed to instantly rewind. On that day, we had been in this same place, the magic academy.

Gardner, Cecil, Cain, and Harry were all pointing at me derisively, spitting at me. And behind them, my brother held a fearful Maribelle, comforting her...his glass-like green eyes looking at me scornfully like a corrupt creature.

"We're together..."

"We're finally together!" Maribelle's eager voice lined up with the one in my head.

When I had been trampled by Cecil in the book, I looked up to my brother as if to beg for his help, as he smiled adoringly at Maribelle with no thought to me lying on the ground in an unseemly state...

My brother had always been that way. He never paid any mind to anybody but those he loved. The person he'd nurtured in his arms had always been me...but in an instant, that person had switched to Maribelle.

My brother...was betraying me again...

"Sere! This isn't Larouza! Get yourself together!"

"Larouza! Wake up!" My father contorted his face, thrust his right hand upward to summon hellfire, and hurled it at my brother!

“Father! No!”

The hellfire sucked in the air around it as it went for my brother. A direct hit!

“Brother!”

Just as the flames reached my brother, he wrapped Maribelle in my cloak to protect her...!

Fwoosh... The flames disappeared. I looked up at my father, and he was on his knees, the hand he had been raising lowered.

Father...

“Sere!”

I snapped my gaze back to my brother, and he threw a lightning arrow! It went over my head...straight for our father! He wouldn't miss on purpose like our father had!

“Father!”

He was looking dumbfoundedly at the arrow his own son had shot at him... It was too late to dodge!

The air around him suddenly vibrated, and a tornado appeared just in time to deflect the arrow.

“You idiot! Don't let your guard down! Larouza! Come to your senses! Erza is going to give you a beating!” Ziek scolded from behind my father, who drew in a breath and lowered his head to Ziek. Then he leaped to my side.

“I'm sorry, Serephione...”

I shook my head. My father wasn't at fault for this at all.

“I'll bring your kind brother back for you, Serephi.” Tears glistened in his eyes. The fighting spirit that he suppressed on a daily basis was on full display.

So this is the true power of a Granzeus. He really was a demon lord. He was going to bring my brother down...by force.

I knew that my father was incredibly strong...but he would stop at the last moment. His body and mind were made of love for us. He could never stand to see my brother hurt.

But that didn't matter to my brother right now. He would counter without emotion. I couldn't just stand by and watch it happen.

I had to take the brunt of his hatred...just like in the book.

Tap! Gillain landed between me and my father, bringing a magical presence that surpassed even my father's. He gave my father's hand a twist. Some kind of spell dispersed.

"Emperor Gillain..."

"I can't let family fight."

I drew in a breath. Those were heavy words because Gillain, of all people, was saying them.

"I'll take the stage here. Stand back, dear father-in-law."

"Your Imperial Majesty..." My father, who would have been unable to attack his own son anyway, smiled sadly, lowered his head to Gillain, and took several steps back.

I looked up at Gillain. *Can I really involve him in a fight with my family?*

"Don't worry, Sere. I'll end this without having to kill Larouza."

He was going to stand in the line of fire for me and my father and do something more difficult than fighting at full power—take his opponent alive. I should have been the one to do it...but I knew I couldn't attack my brother either. We weren't siblings who hated each other! We'd loved each other ever since we were born.

A cowardly part of me was relieved to let Gillain take care of my dirty work. I shook hard, my teeth chattering.

Gillain pulled me to himself without looking away from my brother.

"Ah..."

"You're finally relying on me. I'm glad I came," he said, resting his cheek on my head. "This is my first time fighting for someone I love. It's romantic." He tenderly kissed my forehead.

"Here and now, we're going to sever the sorrows that followed you into this

life.” He gazed into my eyes and nodded as if to seal the promise.

“The emperor of Galé?! See, we’re back to the story now! Larouza, Galé is our enemy! The emperor and the villainess are targeting our kingdom! They’re the bad guys! They did such mean things to me! Please defeat them for me so we can create a peaceful world together!”

My brother took Maribelle at her word and turned to look at us. He gave me a chilling glare. My heart felt like it was being squeezed.

“Maribelle... You’re badly hurt. You should retreat for now.” Schneider used the last of his strength to interject. *Is he trying to buy me some time?*

“Did I ask?! I don’t need you anymore now that Larouza is here. You’re just a background character, anyway. Right, Larouza?”

Maribelle had cut Schneider off without a second thought. That changed the situation drastically.

Terl, sensing danger, took a protective position in front of Schneider and readied his magic. He seemed to think that depending on Maribelle’s mood, the brunt of Larouza’s attack may fall on them...

“Lou, have Sere stand back. We can’t fight with her here,” Asu said from Lou’s shoulder before he took off and began to hover in the sky.

I noticed Lou hesitating to leave my side and gave him a push. “Please, Lou... Save my brother. I’ll stay in the corner for you.”

Having Lou assist them would give them the edge they needed. It would also reduce the risk to Gillain and make it easier to capture my brother alive.

“Miyu, restrain Maribelle, and attack from two places at once to keep my brother from focusing. I don’t think Maribelle can move because of the backfired curses, but be careful still.”

“Miss Se—my master...please make sure not to endanger yourself.” Miyu kissed my cheek and immediately slipped into a crack somewhere. Once I’d seen Miyu off, I nodded to Lou and stepped back toward my father.

Lou sat his giant form next to Gillain. “Larouza... I’ll have to punish you later for forgetting our past together.”

He pulled the giant emerald necklace my brother had given him from inside the fur on his chest, but my brother's face remained cold.

“Unacceptable!”

Lou's magic inside me was wild and enraged. It had never felt like this for as long as I'd known him. I could tell I'd become sensitive to the state of the magic in my body that I'd received from others...but noticing how I'd grown didn't change my current situation.

Lou wasn't angry at my brother. He was furious at this contrived, unfair situation.

The magic my brother exuded steadily swelled until the entire stadium creaked under its pressure.

Asu's voice sounded from above. “Larouza is strong due to his past devotion to Serephione. Go all out on him, Gillain. As long as he doesn't die, I can make it work.”

“I doubt Larouza will hold back this time either. Whatever happens will happen, I suppose.” Gillain grimaced and cast a sparkling magic on both himself and Asu—probably defense magic.

Gillain... Brother...!

My father squeezed my hand. Intertwining our fingers and gritting our teeth, we braced ourselves where we stood. We had no choice but to have faith that Gillain would save my brother and he would return to his normal self.

My expressionless brother took his trusty shurikens and threw them at the ground. Where they landed, the earth protruded like spears into the sky, projecting toward Asu one after another. This was a forbidden earth magic technique, Landsharp. It was a one-shot kill he had taught me a long time ago. Remembering one of the many fun days we'd spent training together with Lou and being scolded by our grandmother made me want to cry.

Asu soared high in the sky. Lou used his front paws to smash the towering spears. My brother's attack was focused on the human, Gillain. He leaped to evade it, but he cut his arm on the sharp edge of the third spear. Blood dripped from the wound. It seemed like his defensive magic meant nothing in the face

of my brother's power.

"Gillain!"

Gillain enveloped himself with wind and leaped, grabbing Asu's ankle with his right hand. Asu flew with such grace that it was hard to believe he had a grown man hanging from him. My brother threw shurikens at the two endlessly.

Gillain held out the pointer finger of his left hand, which was still gripping Asu's leg. Wind began to rotate around his finger and whirl, then it shot out. The scalpel of wind blew away the shurikens and cut the sharp ends off of the earth spears, creating footholds around the battlefield before it dissipated. Gillain and Lou each got on top of one of the newly formed pedestals.

Lou jumped off to attack my brother! Larouza quickly pushed Maribelle, who had been in his arms, farther away, and threw shurikens at Lou with both hands. Lou deflected them with his tail and instantly surrounded my brother with sand. Lou's eyes glinted, and the sand shone in rainbow colors. It was an illusion technique of Lou's—Mirage! My brother began to shake and held his head with one hand. Lou hardened the sand around my brother's feet to fasten him to the ground.

Miyu took the opening to come out and wrap herself around Maribelle. "My father, Erza, Elise, and now Larouza... I'll never let you get away with what you've done!"

Miyu created a cubic barrier around herself and filled it with water. She was trying to trap Maribelle, along with herself, in a water-filled chamber!

"Hey, dragon! Come to your senses! The villainess is over there! Eeeek! Cough, cough..."

"*You* should come to your senses. Elise and my kind master have given you more than enough chances."

Miyu dove into the water along with Maribelle. My brother blew away Lou's mirage and tried to throw a shuriken to break the water cage, but the cage just wobbled like it was made of rubber and returned to its original shape. It wasn't magical, probably to keep Maribelle from breaking it.

While my brother's back was turned, Gillain shot what looked like thousands

of blue comets from his left hand with a powerful magic force. Water? No, fire —fire so hot that it was blue! It must have been hot enough to melt gold, yet its color still reminded me of Gillain’s eyes. He must have learned the technique from Asu, since he was the god of flame. If he had concentrated all that power into one ball, it would have killed on impact. He’d split it up to avoid killing my brother. The reason he was using such a powerful technique to cut the fight short was for my sake.

I couldn’t think of any magic that could possibly counter these comets.

“Broth—” I tried to call out to my brother, but my father put his hand over my mouth. I couldn’t form my next words. All I could do was look on as the flames approached my brother.

The blue flames grazed my brother’s cheek, burning him. I vividly remembered the pain and the burning scent from being attacked with fire when I fought in the book. *No! I don’t want my brother to be hurt!*

Now sporting a noticeable burn mark on his cheek, he raised his right hand into the air and took a sword from his Magic Room. It was a one-handed sword, which was unusual for him. He gave it a practice swing, and it spun so fast I couldn’t visually keep up, deflecting the flames!

“How...?”

Of course, I didn’t want my brother to be hurt...but how was he using a sword to counter flames so hot that they were blue? Why didn’t the sword melt or break? Was it a magical sword? Did he enchant it somehow?

“What is that sword...?” My father watched warily.

“That wave motion... Could it be orichalcum...?” Asu murmured in shock.

Orichalcum? The legendary metal that can pierce anything if forged into a weapon?

“Larouza... The gods sealed away that material after the war at the dawn of creation, and it should have been unusable to humans...and you’ve dug it up and forged a weapon with it? All for Sere’s sake... That’s just like you...” Lou’s eyes drooped with sadness as he looked at my brother.

That's my brother for you...a real treasure hunter. I smiled tearfully.

He continued to deflect the flames and began to break up Lou's sand at his feet. Then he stepped over to Maribelle's side and slashed the cage of water with the orichalcum sword. The water began to gush out. Orichalcum could break even Miyu's water chamber.

"Larouza..."

Maribelle was wrapped up by Miyu, so I couldn't see how she was doing. My brother swung his sword at Miyu. *My Miyu!*

"Stop right there!" Miyu knocked it away with her tail, but it still injured her scales, and she began to bleed.

"Miyu!"

Even my cute little Miyu is hurt... I was far from her, but I still used my "pain, pain, go away" charm. Her body, which she'd been clenching tight, relaxed slightly from the pain, and Maribelle's face poked out. She was unconscious, possibly from lack of oxygen. *Maribelle is down! Thank goodness. That means she can't charm my brother anymore, right?!*

But my brother swung his sword at Miyu again! *Why?!* And Miyu wouldn't let go of Maribelle no matter what! Because I'd ordered her...

Lou hurled himself at my brother. "Larouza!" He got in front of Miyu and stood in my brother's way.

He wasn't going back to normal. Would he not stop attacking unless Maribelle told him to? I couldn't handle that... Even if Maribelle did come to, she would only egg him on.

What can we do...?

Skreeee! There was a grating noise. I covered my ears and searched for the source to see Asu high in the sky, flapping his wings at a high frequency to produce the sound.

"These sound waves hinder brain functionality. Try not to let them into your ears!"

My brother covered his ears and glared into the sky. His target switched from

Miyu to Asu. He ran at Asu and jumped into the sky...trying to slash at Asu's rainbow wings!

"Emperor! Take this!" Ziek suddenly shouted and threw something from the stands. Gillain jumped up, grabbed it with his left hand, and drew out...a wide, black sword.

It was the Black Sword of Trundle, said to be unbreakable. We had kept it with my grandmother as a protective sword.

Did he bring it as a rule of thumb? To prepare for the unexpected? Nice thinking...

Can the Black Sword counter my brother? Gillain blocked my brother's sword as he swung it at Asu in the sky. The heavy swing nearly hit his forehead, but he resisted and pushed back.

As soon as the two hit the ground, Gillain dashed for my brother with long steps and began to trade blows with him.

He was at a disadvantage. My brother wouldn't hesitate to strike at any of Gillain's openings with all his might, but Gillain was stuck on the defensive, trying to discover a weakness in my brother. Gillain was trying to strike a vital area to knock him out.

It was all for my sake.

Asu was maintaining the unpleasant noise. I felt sick. The technique may have been intended to bring my brother back to his right mind or to lower his agility, but it was a double-edged sword.

My brother suddenly stepped back. He hadn't been pushed, so it gave me a bad feeling. He once again reached into his Magic Room with his left hand, pulled something out, and threw it!

A kunai hit the base of Asu's wing! Crimson blood dripped onto the ground.

"Asu!"

How did it hit? I know it probably had some complex magic on it, but it shouldn't have been able to get through Asu's defense! Holy beasts aren't that weak! Miyu was only hurt because the sword was orichalcum—

“Oh...”

The kunai was also orichalcum. Of course my brother hadn't mined orichalcum just to make one sword. He must have made many weapons...

Gillain had only one human-forged black sword against an assortment of orichalcum weapons. He wouldn't be able to hold up forever.

Asu lost his balance and began to fall, spinning in the air. Gillain dashed over and caught Asu just before he hit the ground. Asu's blood soaked into Gillain's uniform. The wound was deep, but Asu had the ability to heal himself. Still, that required time, and he couldn't focus on healing with an opponent right before him!

My brother, eyes still blank, charged Gillain. Gillain remained motionless, still holding the full-sized Asu. He deliberately held Asu in his right arm and clutched his sword in his left, leaving his heart wide open, his eyes squinting. He was giving my brother a target. Was he planning to counter? Would it succeed?

Neither of them could possibly come out unscathed.

Please stop fighting... I don't want anyone else to get hurt for my sake...

I can't just watch my beloved older brother kill my beloved Gillain...

I'm sorry I'm so weak...and I'm sorry I took so long to come to this decision.

I squeezed my father's hand with all the gratitude I could muster.

“Serephi?”

“Speed.”

I let go of his hand and dashed straight forward without looking back.

“Sere!” Lou yelled, still protecting Miyu.

The moment Gillain reacted to Lou's yell, my brother closed in, gripping his sword in both hands and aiming to pierce Gillain's heart. And just before he could, I stepped in between them.



Gh...

The orichalcum sword pierced through all my defenses directly below my left collarbone, right where Gillain's heart would have been. A strong pain hit me, and blood began to drip from the wound.

Right before my eyes was my brother's expressionless face. Even now, he still looked handsome.

Blood rose up into my throat from my chest, and I coughed it up. My legs went weak. It brought back memories...it had felt the same when I'd lost too much blood in the book.

"Sere!" Gillain raised his voice for once, embracing me from behind along with Asu. I hadn't been pierced all the way through... He froze my wound along with the sword to try to stop the blood.

"Sere!" Asu kissed my face with no care for himself, breathing heavily onto me... It felt like a hot spring.

I have to tell my brother...it's okay...not to feel guilty about it...since he was being controlled...

"Sere!"

"Miss Sere!"

Oh, no... I'm losing my hearing... Come on, Serephione... Keep it together!

I finally managed to lift my arm...and gently touch my brother's eye with my fingertip. He was still gripping the hilt of his sword, so he wasn't able to stop me... *Pain, pain...go away...*

I hope your eyes can go back to being clear green...and you can remember me...remember us all...

"Brother... I love you... Please, don't suffer... Remember me... I...love you..."

Suddenly, a light flashed in my brother's eyes, and they wavered. He furrowed his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Wh...? Huh? Why... Sere...phione?"

For some reason...both of my earrings shattered at once. The shards flew

toward my brother's eyes...and he let go of the sword he'd been holding, grabbing at the shattered pieces with wide eyes!

"S-Serephione! I... I... Waaaaaah!"

Your kind emerald eyes are back...like the gentle winds of the Granzeus domain... No, don't cry... I haven't seen you cry...since that snowy day long ago...

"Serephi! Serephi!"

Papa's healing magic...

"Wait! This sword has a hook! Don't pull it out!"

Miyu...

"Out of the way! Take some of my blood!"

That's not a good idea, Asu... I'll become immortal if I drink your blood...

"Sere! Sere, we'll help you! Stay strong! Asu! Heal yourself for a second, and then Sere! Please!"

Gillain... You're only giving Asu a second?

Gillain—the one and only person I'd been able to have faith in for so long—held me close and begged just next to my ear. "Sere, don't you dare leave me! Come back!"

I, in turn, sought out his ear. "I'm sorry, Gillain... I can't keep my promise..."

I swore I would stay by your side...protect you for my whole life... Now I'm leaving you all alone...to be lonely...

Gillain's magic raged within me.

"Sere..."

Lou... My other half... My treasure...

A tear rolled down my cheek. Lou licked it up. *Your tongue is so scratchy... He he...*

"I'm sorry... I'm...sorry..." I pleaded.

"It's okay, Sere. It's okay... You don't have to apologize..."

Lou forgives me... I'm...so glad...

“Thank you, Lou...”

“Don’t leave me! Sere!!!”

“A-Appraisal!” Miyu whispered. I shone blue.

Serephione Granzeus (Daughter of a count, S-rank adventurer, head of the Trundle house, empress-to-be of Galé, contracted with Loudarylphena and Miyu-geld, beloved by Asucariela, under protection of Kilamageld)

Status: Near death

Skills: All magic, reincarnated, short lance, shuriken, poison resistance

“Grooooooar!”

As everything went dark around me, Lou roared at the bluish-white moon.

Chapter 8: Another Encounter with the Holy Beasts

The next thing I knew, I was walking toward a calm, lemon-yellow light.

I looked down at my feet. They were bare. And I should have been covered in blood from coughing it up, even if it wasn't very visible on my gray clothes, but I was in a pure white, thigh-length dress.

I also noticed that the legs peeking out from under my dress were tiny...and so were my hands. *Did I reincarnate again? Give me a break...*

I toddled forward with tiny steps, and an impossibly large magic force drifted toward me from the front. There were countless strong magic presences, but it was strange...

I'm not afraid at all. Because...I'm already dead?

How long has it been? A long time?

I felt heartbreakingly sad...but when I tried to turn back, my vision was blurred and blotted out.

Hey... I recognize one of those magic presences!

It was calm, like a tranquil lake... I broke into a smile and dashed forward.

"Kilama!" I hopped up onto her long, white-scaled neck and latched on like a bug.

Kilama curled her long tail forward to support my small body from behind. She was as kind as I remembered.

"You're as lovely as you ever were, Sere." Kilama tilted her long neck, smiled gently, and rubbed her cheek against my head. Her chin hair tickled me.

"So, this child is Louda's beloved..."

I heard a calm voice like a young man's in my head. I lifted my head to see a pure white tiger as big as the elephants in my past life looking at me. His gray eyes were warm and looked at me with a sort of nostalgia... *Oh, I know!*

“Magan...?”

“You are correct.”

This was Lou’s father. Out of sheer happiness, I jumped off Kilama and ran over to Magan, burying my face in his fur (which was thicker than Lou’s) to have my fill of fluff. He smelled exactly like Lou—like a refreshing breeze on a snowy mountain.

Magan was taken aback at first, but he quickly resigned (?) himself and let me sit on his back as he began to walk. My vantage point was higher than when I sat on Lou. It was fun. I felt like I’d become younger not just in body, but in mind and behavior; I wanted to be indulged. I figured it was okay since he was allowing it.

Kilama and Magan... Does that mean this is the afterlife?

“Not quite. We’re gods, so our vessels may have died, but not our beings.”

Ooh, they can read my mind. That makes things easier.

“Why am I little now?”

“It’s more efficient.”

Efficient... Lou said the same thing. Do holy beasts really like efficiency?

Kilama slithered along beside us and helped explain. A tree overflowing with light came into view.

A god was enshrined at the base of the giant tree, which had round leaves and golden apple-like fruits growing on its branches.

The god was shining gold. Once my eyes got used to the light, its shape reminded me of a deer or a horse. Its body shone with a faint iridescent green, like the source of life itself. A golden mane covered its back, and its two golden horns towered into the sky. Its yellow-gold eyes seemed to see into the past and future...

It’s...a kirin...

Magan gently lowered me to the ground and settled down to the left (my right) of the kirin. Kilama sat at its right (my left). The kirin seemed rather small

compared to the two holy beasts at its sides, but its apparent size meant nothing. It emanated a stronger force than I'd ever felt before.

I knelt down and assumed the most deferential knight position, which wasn't the easiest thing to do as a tiny kid.

"This is the goddess's garden. The god you see here is our originator, the moon goddess herself. She requested you," Kilama quietly informed me.

Whoa... I was picturing a human form, since she was called a goddess. So, this kirin is the highest god of this world and the one who conceived my beloved Lou...

"Lift your face."

Each word she spoke in her indescribably grand voice struck me with awe.

"Come closer."

I directly approached the goddess without a second thought.

Her legs were cloaked in a haze, so I couldn't see her hooves. As soon as I came close enough to notice that, my legs stopped moving. I knelt again.

"I see I've caused you pain once again, Serephione..."

She poked my head with her nose. A powerful energy surged into my body, numbing me.

Once again...?

I slowly lifted my face to see her golden eyes just before me. In her eyes, I saw my past life in *Wild Rose* reflected as if I were viewing a screen. It was me, bloodying myself in battle, being betrayed, condemned, and dying alone.

The goddess knows everything...so is it okay if I ask her? Is that allowed here?

"Would you tell me more?"

Ding... Ring... The faint sound of bells, quiet enough not to be distracting, came from somewhere.

"A god of a faraway world made a request of me. He wanted a soul that had met an unfortunate end to be reborn in my world. I felt a deep sympathy for

this soul as well, and I took it in.”

I noticed that Magan was now curled up behind me, nestling me into his stomach with his tail. I sank into his fur.

Can I relax like this while I listen to the goddess speak? Magan gently groomed my hair. Apparently, it was okay to stay like that.

“However, that soul failed to integrate into our world. Our world could not have been called peaceful, but it was stable...and this soul stirred up trouble by applying the rules and logic of his world to ours, destroying our order.”

Is this other world Earth? That would mean...

“Is the soul you took in Maribelle?”

The goddess blinked to answer me.

“She behaved without consideration for others, perhaps due to psychological damage she acquired in the other god’s world. Lacking respect for this world’s long history, she became the queen of a kingdom, destroying it and leading the world to ruin. Since she was under the protection of this other god, the people had no ability to resist.”

That means a god from Earth was backing her up so she could use her Autopilot and charm skills...

“There was nothing I could do about her. A promise once made between two gods is irrevocable. Yet my world was in ruin because of a foreign soul I had allowed in... Just before everything collapsed, I reluctantly reset the timeline.”

“Reset the timeline?”

She turned back time to redo everything?!

“Reset...” Kilama and Magan were shocked. They apparently hadn’t known about this.

“Although I reset the timeline, I could not change my fate to take that soul in. That was when I had the idea to take a soul from his land that understood the inner workings of this unruly soul to counter it. I selected a just-deceased soul whose frequency matched that of my land and placed it in the body of one of my beloved people, Serephione. Serephione’s life had been the most altered by

Maribelle. If not for Maribelle, Serephione would have been destined to rule as queen and bring stability to the kingdom. This time around, you, Serephione, nearly died along with your mother just after being born, as if you were remembering your past fate and despairing. Between the flawless bloodline you were born into from this world and the kind soul you had brought from the other world, I felt that it was fate that the two should come together. The two beings melded together with no opposition, and I deliberately left memories from both past lives to guide you. I believed that you could return this world to its rightful state.”

That makes me...like an antivirus program...

I wasn't particularly angry. It was too late for that. However I'd come about, I was still me, the same me who'd tried so hard to live a good life for all these years. If anything, I felt relieved after having my questions answered.

“However...this time was also a failure. The influence of the god from the other world was stronger than I'd anticipated. It could be due to strong faith, or a matter of population... Serephione, your efforts remained unrewarded in your second life as well as your first...”

So I really did have two past lives...one on Earth, and one as Serephione. Neither one was fictional. I have a question, in that case!

“What does it mean that this world is similar to a book on Earth called *Wild Rose*? Maribelle seemed to be acting arrogantly because she thought things would play out as they did in that book, due to the resemblance.”

The goddess slowly shook her head. “I don't know. Although it is beyond human knowledge, there are countless parallel worlds in the realm of the gods. It could be that my world happened to resemble *Wild Rose*, which inspired the god to reach out to me...or perhaps the person who wrote this book of prophecy was aware of my world. From what I have heard, the reason Maribelle caused such trouble is because she was convinced that this is the same world as that of *Wild Rose*.”

That makes sense... If people can reincarnate from Earth into this world, then it's possible that people could reincarnate onto Earth from here.

The god from Earth had tried to make the events of this world go like *Wild*

Rose, since that was what his darling Maribelle wanted. That meant that Autopilot only worked on characters from the book because Maribelle was so focused on the plot and didn't express interest in anything else. That had been more than enough victims, though.

"But Maribelle destroyed her own life. Nobody antagonized her in this world, so she did whatever she wanted under others' protection and ended up unable to move from her own curses backfiring on her."

"Yes, it is precisely because she brought about her own demise despite her fortunate reincarnation that the god of that world couldn't interfere. I have more than fulfilled my promise to him. If he is not happy with this ending, he can simply take her back."

"And Judore may have been damaged, but Gil is going to be king. As for Trundle, I'm sure my grandmother will wake up and rally everyone. The world didn't fall apart this time. Doesn't that mean the timeline reset was a success?"

It would take time, but the people of this world would work together to rebuild, and peace would come again, especially since Gil, my grandmother, and Gillain were at the top...although I wouldn't be there.

"But you've been hurt so badly, Sere." Kilama screwed up her face in pain, her voice sad.

"You have carried the fate of my land on your own from a young age and fought against Maribelle. As the goddess of this world, I cannot call a timeline where you were sacrificed a success."

"Are you...?" Magan gave the goddess a doubtful look.

"I am going to reset the timeline again. This time made for a good sample. Next time, if she doesn't understand that this world is not *Wild Rose*, I will lead her to bring herself to ruin before she harms my land. What would you like for yourself? Would you like a quiet life in a small, isolated village far from Judore? Or should I return you to the other god's world?"

Another reset?

So everything will go back to when Maribelle was reincarnated...before I was born?

I don't know... I definitely didn't come out unscathed, but I finally was able to see a bright future without Maribelle's shadow looming over it. And there's no guarantee that the next time will be any better, even if she does have a sample...

And does that mean my entire life will be erased back to a blank slate? After all that suffering and training I went through with Lou to make it to this point? Right, Lou!

I hastily stood up. "Goddess, Lou and Asu and Miyu and everyone fought Teri for my sake! Please, don't punish them! I'll take responsibility for everything they did!"

"Whatever reasons they may have had, a taboo is a taboo... Why do you want to take on their misdeeds?" Magan peered at me from behind with his gray eyes.

"Because...Lou and I are one and the same!"

"Even after you died?"

Am I not allowed to speak on Lou once I die?! Can't we still be one and the same?

"Even in death...Lou is my other half. I'll shoulder his misdeeds with him. You can give me any punishment you have to! Please...let Lou and Asu and Miyu live peacefully..."

They should have been able to live as just members of the four holy beasts, but they went through so much for my sake...

"Sere... Do you really think they can live peacefully without you? A holy beast whose contractor has died is a sorry thing to see..." Kilama looked into the distance as if she may have had a painful separation in her past.

Asu had said that if a holy beast's contractor died when it wasn't the will of the gods, it meant the loss of the holy beast's soul. I didn't know what loss meant... Would Lou and Miyu disappear in despair after losing me?

I couldn't let that happen... Maybe it was the right thing to do to reset the timeline and undo their contracts with me.

I remembered seeing Lou bouncing through the silver-white snow.

I remembered Miyu, happily curled up on the lesser dragon's back among the fragrant wildflowers.

Was it the right thing to return them to those cute forms, before they got involved with me?

No... I can't. I don't want to forget them, and I don't want them to forget me. The days we spent together are precious to me. I can't just let them be erased! Please... It's selfish of me to want, but please stay my Lou...

"Moon goddess, please don't reset the timeline... I was happy enough! I was loved by my father and brother and grandmother, I met Lou, I had the adorable Miyu by my side, I had Asu take care of me, and I got engaged to Gillain."

Tears spilled from my eyes.

"This time was a success, so, please, keep it this way! If you feel bad for me at all, then make everyone I left behind happy! They all contributed to overthrowing Maribelle and bringing peace to this world, so let them have a new family, a new contractor! I'll take any divine punishment I have to, so please...!"

Make everyone I love happy...

Kilama sighed and shook her head. "You always look out for others first and disregard yourself. This must be why your magic is so gentle and pure, and how you can remain calm in our presence... How tragic."

"Serephione, do you think Louda will be happy if he finds a new contractor? Do you think Gillain will remain unbroken without you? Do you think he can take a new partner after you died defending him? If you do, then you are a fool. Face the magic within you!" Magan furiously growled, baring his fangs.

The magic within me? Can I just try to sense it? I closed my eyes and focused on my heart...

I found Lou's refreshing magic. It was a whirlpool of rage and sadness...and a blackness surrounding it...powerlessness?

Then Miyu's flowery magic... The cheerful Miyu was wilting. Her floral scent

was fading away...and she seemed disappointed in herself.

And Gillain's bitter coffee... His magic was a storm of anger with no outlet. His pain stuck like a knife in my own heart. Despondency and bitterness toward the world were overtaking the quiet, sweet Gillain that only I knew...

"You and Louda are one and the same. You are connected in both body and soul. Louda could never form a new contract after watching you grow up and learning all your past feelings. Don't underestimate his devotion to you. What you sensed just now is Louda's despair."

Back there, I hadn't seen any choice but to jump between my brother and Gillain. I hadn't meant to hurt everyone like this. What could I do to lighten their hearts?

Do I really have no option but to reset the timeline? Do they have no chance to live happily unless I never existed in the first place? That must be it... I'm already dead now, after all, so it would be the same in the end if I had never existed...

I guess I didn't make it past the age of seventeen after all.

My life had been shorter this time than when I'd died at eighteen in my past life. My dream of making it to my marriage at nineteen had been unattainable after all. But I was okay to leave it as a dream...I was happy enough to have had the chance to dream of being Gillain's wife.

In my dreams, I'd put on the white dress my grandmother had prepared for me countless times, and next to me was...

Gillain... I can't hurt you and your wounded heart any more than I already have.

I raised my head and gave the goddess my request. "You may go ahead with the timeline reset. I pray that the third time is a success."

"And...?"

"But I don't want to be reincarnated again."

"You mean...you would like to return to the other world...Earth?"

"I don't know how the flow of time really works, but I don't think I would still have loved ones left if I went back to Earth now. I just want to be a spirit that

protects Gillain.”

“A spirit?” The goddess tilted her head.

“Oh, but maybe Asu would chase me away if I was like a ghost that haunted Gillain... I know...wind! I want to be a warm wind that always stays with Gillain!”

It was a great idea. I remembered multiple songs from my past life on Earth about people becoming winds after death and protecting their families and loved ones. I’d become a wind, part of the air, and stay with Gillain from the beginning to the end in his next life to keep him warm, so his eyes would never freeze over. I’d made a promise...I’d vowed to him that I wouldn’t let him be alone ever again.

“Wait! What about Louda?”

“It’s not that I love Gillain more than Lou...but I’m the only one who understands Gillain’s loneliness. The loneliness of fighting all by yourself with nobody to stand behind you...”

The shock of being betrayed by relatives, the heartlessness of having to kill or be killed, the gradual emotional clouding from having to kill innocent people for your country, and the wearing down of your soul from being feared as a murderer...these things made up the sad common point between me and Gillain that was loneliness.

In this life, I’d been happy and loved by my family. That reality would disappear, but I would take all that love I’d received and pass it on to Gillain...my beloved, twisted Gillain, who deep down wanted to love.

He was the only person who hadn’t betrayed me in my past life, and he’d loved me just as unconditionally in this life.

I wouldn’t let Gillain sink into that sea of loneliness again.

“Lou has Magan and the moon goddess... Please make him happy for me.” I managed a smile.

“Serephione...”

“Please, goddess! Oh, and I’d like to keep my memories if I can... It can’t hurt,

since I can't talk to anyone if I'm incorporeal..." I chuckled.

Magan suddenly lifted me with one leg and licked my face with his large tongue. I was crying again.

"Have mercy, goddess..." Magan pressed his forehead against mine. His magic, a bit harsher than Lou's, flowed into me.

"Your heart must be so deeply wounded, to shed tears in the goddess's garden, a space harmonized to prevent the soul from being disturbed... Goddess..." Kilama's voice shook.

"You want to be a wind... Have you grown tired of being a person?" the goddess asked coolly, yet sympathetically. *Have I? Maybe I have.*

"Are you running away, Serephione?" Magan growled as if to challenge me. *Is this running away? From being a person? Is that unfair...? But I've always been a simple, weak chicken anyway.*

"I now understand why all my children are so captivated by you... You are honest and intelligent. Even your weakness is pure." The goddess shook her head gracefully, gold scattering from her mane. Then she slowly approached as Magan still held me.

"Maribelle is beloved by the god of the other world....but she does not outdo you in that regard, Serephione. Not just Loudarylphena, Miyu, and Asucariela, but also the deceased Kilamageld and Maganvar cherish you and wish for your inner peace at this moment. This cannot be disregarded, since we are not easily swayed emotionally..."

The goddess's golden eyes looked straight into my soul. "I shall grant your wish, Serephione. I promise to reincarnate you as a gentle, light wind that will warm Gillain."

A single golden tear fell from the goddess's eye and washed over me like a mist. A veil of light enveloped me. I could feel that the promise had been fulfilled.

"Goddess! Wait!"

"Goddess, there must be another way..."

Magan and Kilama hastily interjected.

“There is no other way. The best way to reward Serephione’s hardships is to grant her wish. Serephione, may you run freely and peacefully throughout my land...”

The goddess clacked her hoof. An overwhelming light radiated from her entire body. With a spectacular release of magic power, incomprehensible magic circles floated into the air one after the other.

The timeline was being reset!

My body also began to glow, and I instantly grew to my original size... My hair floated into the air, and I levitated away from Magan’s warm chest.

I was slowly melting into the atmosphere. I vaguely understood that I was turning into mist.

What came to my mind in that moment was Gillain. Did that mean he was my biggest regret? I didn’t think it could be any other way, since he would be the one all alone after our memories disappeared and the timeline was reset.

I wondered what Lou would say if he knew I was going to spend eternity with Gillain. Would he be angry, since Gillain already had Asu? Or would he come with me anyway? But I wouldn’t be able to make cakes as wind, so that might halve my attractiveness to him.

Gillain wasn’t good at relating to others as equals due to his upbringing, which was why he assumed such an arrogant attitude...but deep down, he had never been arrogant. He always respected my opinions. More than that, he carefully measured the distance between us and took care not to scare me off...even though I would have liked him regardless. I found that aspect of him cute, maybe as a holdover from being reincarnated at around thirty.

When he ate my cakes, he would always look relieved, smile, and say thank you, although he didn’t like sweets much. Lou, Asu, and us two who were afraid of happiness had only had a few moments together, but they were all precious and irreplaceable to me.

Gillain had faced a cruel fate in both this life and the last. In his next life, I would find him faster than Asu could and surround him with warmth. This

time...I would be a place for him to belong.

That's right... I never did get to say one thing to you.

I love you, Gillain... I still love you from all this distance away, and I always will...

The three gods finally began to blur, and my senses dulled as my consciousness began to fade. I closed my eyes and let myself go...

Then, a shock suddenly ran through my body!

Just when I had been disintegrating into little particles, my physical body reformed. A familiar magic flowed into me. I could move of my own free will again, and my feet touched the ground. I traced the magic to its source...and it was pouring down from the heavens. The three gods and I were at a loss for words.

What just happened?

"Uhh, what's going on? Whose magic is this?"

Magan was looking up as well. "You can't tell? That's your own magic, Sere."

Mine? But I'm right here? I'm not releasing any magic.

"It seems you're cursed."

Cursed? Did Maribelle do this?!

"Of course not... This is clearly your own curse, Serephione," Magan said as if he was shocked that I didn't know.

"B-But I've never used a curse! I don't even know how!"

Kilama hummed and closed her eyes. It seemed like she was an expert on curses, as expected from Miyu's predecessor. "It would seem that this is a curse you cast on a starry night long ago, when you were a child."

Huh...? That beautiful night when I talked to Gillain?

"You mean my magic words?"

Kilama furrowed her brow. "Serephione, the only difference between a curse and magic words is whether they hinder or help the target. They are otherwise

the same.”

I’ve never thought of it that way, but that makes sense... So Maribelle and I had the same power, apart from her Autopilot.

“I’m sure Serephione would never think to use a curse that would hurt another.” Magan smiled wryly.

Does that mean I was brought back by a curse I used?

“So, a curse that you cast ten years ago was strong enough to cancel out my secret timeline reset technique... The curses that you reincarnated cast are frightening.”

I couldn’t read her facial expression, but the goddess seemed a bit exasperated...

“G-Goddess!” *Did I just technically overturn a god’s decision?!* I hastily knelt before the goddess and dipped my head.

“There is nothing I can do about a curse that has already been cast and activated. It would be best if you obeyed your ‘magic words.’”

The goddess seemed to slump her shoulders. Then she stepped forward and poked my head with her nose. When I looked up at her, she opened her mouth wide and bit my head!

“Ahhh!”

A ring of golden light formed before my eyes, then closed around the bite mark on my head and vanished. *What? Am I being punished?!*

The goddess’s eyes crinkled in a smile.

“Wow...”

Kilama, Magan, would you mind explaining why you’re awed by this?

My magic that was coming from the heavens grew stronger, pulling my body upward!

“Whoa!”

My feet lifted off the ground, and I found myself hanging upside down in midair. I reached out to the gods below me in a panic.

“Be well until we meet again, Serephione.”

“Kilama!”

“Tell Louda to work hard on my behalf, Serephione.”

“Magan!”

The three gods and the lemon-yellow world quickly started to recede, and my consciousness blinked out.



The scent of dusty air in my nose told me that I had returned to the world of the living.

A feeling of heaviness hit me. It was hard to move. My brother’s strong magic was spreading from below my neck; it seemed like he’d pulled the orichalcum sword out. I also felt the full-body healing magic that my father had learned just for me swirling around inside my body, along with Asu’s magic.

Outside of my body, I felt someone’s slender frame wrapped around me, warming me up with the comforting, familiar scent of coffee.

I focused my mind and managed to open my eyes. Gillain’s face was inches from mine, wet with tears for the first time I’d ever seen.

Tears dripped from Gillain’s icy-blue eyes onto my face. I used what strength I could muster to lift my hand and gently wipe his cheek.

My voice was weak, but I managed to ask, “When we saw the stars that night...what did you wish for?”

Gillain wiped my tears away with his thumb and spoke softly and sadly into my ear.

“I’ve only ever wished for one thing...to live alongside you.”

His face contorted with pain.

“You’re all I need...” He whispered into my ear and gave me a gentle kiss.

Ah... His wish came true. I have cheat code powers, after all.

More tears spilled from my eyes. Lou’s sky blue eyes entered my field of view

from the side. The miniature-sized Lou rubbed his head against my cheek from where he stood on Gillain's arm and licked up my tears. I tilted my head to press my cheek against Lou's, taking in the furry sensation that I loved. Gillain held me to his chest carefully as if he were holding something fragile, and I relaxed and closed my eyes.

The moon rose high, filling the area with a soft light.

Chapter 9: Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer!

It had been several days since the fight with Schneider and Maribelle. You'd think I'd be in Gillain's arms again, like the romantic moment when I came back to life, but no... In the background of my reawakening, one other wild soul had awakened!

"All of you grown men were there, and you bastards were still just going to let Serephione die?! Shame on you!"

Swish! Clang! Bam! Smash!

My grandmother's iron fist had activated...or so I'd heard. Miyu had told me about it after the fact since I'd been asleep at the time. The heavenly beast shook as she told me about it. The victims were my father, brother, Gillain, and Ziek. Apparently, none of them resisted. My grandmother really was the strongest in this world!

At the moment, my grandmother was gallantly nursing me back to health at the Trundle mansion in the capital. The stab wound in my chest was taking a long time to heal; according to my father, it would take about three months. I spent all my time sleepily lying in bed in a room filled with wildflowers that Miyu had picked. The sunlight coming in through the window had grown softer. Spring was near.

"Your healing filled me from head to toe with your magic. How could I not wake up after feeling you cry out in such pain?" my grandmother had told me.

Once I had fully regained consciousness, my beautiful grandmother had already come back. Her white hair somehow made her appear ageless. She gently patted my head and gave me countless "get-better" kisses on the forehead.

Of course, Lou was at my chest as I slept. He was always there when I awoke in a daze. Each time, I would reach out to him, weakly embrace him, and pet his

cheek.

“Sorry, Lou.”

“It’s okay, Sere.”

I fell back asleep.

I was sorry for jumping out recklessly, for risking my life, for agreeing to the timeline reset, and for leaving Lou behind... That one “sorry” contained many apologies.

And Lou said “It’s okay” to all of them. He understood. He had probably intended to accept his fate to disappear along with me. I knew that if it had been me in his place, I would have done the same.

Lou accepted every part of me.

“Thank you, Lou.”

“Thank you for coming back, Sere.”

I love you...

“Your grandmother gave him a good punishment...so please give Larouza your forgiveness.”

My grandmother provided me and my brother an opportunity to compromise, as only she could.

My brother had come running to visit me as soon as he heard I had regained consciousness. His beautiful face was beaten up and swollen so much that he was unrecognizable. It was probably on purpose—so my brother could feel like he’d been properly punished. Anyone would be speechless and sympathize with him if they saw.

“Serephione...” He opened the door and took no initiative to move from it, so I forced my sluggish body upright and went to go toward him.

“No, Serephione! Don’t move!”

He rushed over to me, and I deliberately collapsed into him! I pushed my face into his chest so he couldn’t move away and hugged him.

“I love you, brother.”

I mentally said my magic words for him. *Pain, pain, go from my brother to stupid Schneider and dumb Maribelle!*

“Oh, Serephione... I love you and Lou too. Thank you for saving me...”

Droplets fell onto my head. It brought back memories of the familial bonds we’d forged on that snowy day long ago. I was so glad to know that our feelings hadn’t changed one bit since then.

Lou, who was on my shoulder, deliberately batted my brother’s more swollen cheek. “It’s over now, Larouza. Quit moping about it and think about something more constructive! You should clean up Trundle’s post-war issues in place of Erza and Sere first. There’s a lot of work to do.”

“Lou...”

“You wouldn’t have fallen under Maribelle’s charm if not for my error in judgment. I also should have told you about Maribelle and Sere being Reborn. Those two things make you innocent in this, Larouza. Understood?”

“Okay...” My brother couldn’t deny what a holy beast told him. He smiled tearfully as he listened to me interpret for Lou.

Sorrow remained on his face regardless. There was probably no way to prevent that. My kind brother couldn’t just turn off his guilt about wounding me so badly that I almost died. Only time could resolve it. That meant I had to recover before he did to show him that he had nothing to worry about!

“Good luck on the documents, brother! You better not show Gil or the cabinet ministers any mercy! And take care of the guild for me! You’ll have to fill in the S-rank gap that Gil and I left behind!”

“Yep, I’ll do my best!”

In the end, he didn’t let me heal the burn mark on his cheek.

Now that I was out of commission, I thought I would return the mastership of Trundle to my grandmother, but it apparently wasn’t as simple as that.

“If I make you relinquish your position as master, I don’t know when you’ll

feel up to the task of becoming master again, so I plan to just take care of business as your predecessor. Larouza, you need to get busy! It's your job to wring as much compensation money as you can from Gilbert of Judore! Gilbert may be dear to me, but he's responsible for paying for his nephew's misconduct. A good master can't let personal feelings get in the way of what needs to be done! Oh ho ho ho!"

More than anything, I was glad to see my grandmother back to her usual self.

Once I was able to sit up on my own, Lou finally called a meeting to go over the information we'd gleaned from that day. Since I hadn't been well, I hadn't heard the full story of what had happened since I collapsed.

The attendees were me, Lou, Miyu, Asu, and Gillain. I couldn't spread the information I'd learned about the gods willy-nilly, so it was only the holy beasts and Asu's master, Gillain.

"Sorry to make you come all this way," I apologized from my bed, still wearing the light-blue pajamas from the Marcus Trade Company. The three miniature beasts were on my bed, and Gillain sat in a chair next to me.

"Miss Sere, Miss Sere!"

Miyu was full of fighting spirit to get stronger, so she had been coming and going between Renza on Regan Island and her papa in Trundle. When we were together, though, she wrapped around my waist and wouldn't let go. She'd been quite frightened when the person she was contracted to nearly died, apparently. I stroked her gorgeous blue scales. *Sorry, Miyu...*

"I understand. You were stabbed with a god-killing orichalcum sword; of course it would take a while to fully heal. You seem to have recovered quite a bit already. And your hair is gorgeous!"

"You flatter me, Asu..."

Asu had made me drink his blood directly from his wound at that time. The same blood that would turn me immortal if I cut his head off and drank it from there! *Don't make me drink that... It'll turn me into a yokai...*

As a result, I felt a strong bond with Asu. He felt like a mom to me. It was like

a part of him was in each and every cell in my body. The old scar on my cheek had completely disappeared! And my appearance had even changed! My black hair and eyelashes had a red sheen to them now. I was glad it wasn't red streaks at least...but it was a bit embarrassing.

"It's one thing that Lou's magic has greater influence on you than mine does, but now Asu's does too?" Gillain took a lock of my hair and inspected it.

"Sorry, I guess?"

Gillain was Asu's other half, but I'd gone and taken up too much of Asu's magic.

"That's not what I mean." Gillain twirled my hair around his index finger. Red light twinkled off it.

"I can't stand to see that, Sere! Cut it off like you did in Marsche! You have my permission!"

What a pain...

"A timeline reset..."

Everyone was speechless after I told them what I had heard from the moon goddess.

"So, that girl was as unreasonably strong as she was because she was under the protection of the god from Miss Sere's former world. What was her power called again? Auto-something?"

"So, the reason we didn't lose Sere and time wasn't turned back to make us forget our happy memories was because of Gillain's wish to live with Sere on that one moonlit night."

"I have no idea how that works, and I can't really raise any objections to the goddess's understanding...so yeah, you really did it, Gillain!" Lou thumped Gillain's shoulder.

Gillain's mouth turned up in a smile at Lou's praise. He was in a ninja-style outfit today with a navy shirt and black pants, savoring a cup of tea with his legs crossed.

“Um, Lou, Asu, do you know why Kilama and Magan were with the moon goddess?” Miyu asked.

“I didn’t know they were there either,” Lou replied. “I thought they were just dead. I suppose only their vessels died...”

“They seemed to know all about what happened to us,” Miyu noted.

“I see we get put to work even in death...” Asu grimaced.

“So, tell me already, what happened to Maribelle?” Miyu suddenly sat upright. “I followed your orders and took her down using oxygen deprivation. She could breathe, but with such strong backfired curses on her, I doubt she would have been able to move even if I hadn’t intervened. In order to prevent her from manipulating my thoughts, after I made her faint and Larouza switched the target of his attacks to Asu, I put her to sleep with a poison that only I can cure. But when I saw that you were in danger and left her there to run to you...”

Lou finished her sentence. “Terl took Maribelle away at the same time as you came back to life.”

“Terl did? Where?” Miyu asked.

“I have two ideas. I think Terl either finished Maribelle off himself, or he took her to the goddess.”

Really? He did?

“However much the god of another world may love Maribelle, she’s a resident of this world now,” Asu explained. “She attacked the three of us holy beasts, me, Lou, and Miyu, with malicious intent. She can’t escape divine punishment. Either Terl will deliver it himself, or he will ask the goddess to do so. Considering that the goddess was considering a second timeline reset, he may actually have been ordered by the goddess to secure her, so they can end things this time without future trouble,” Asu explained.

Lou peered at me. “I think that they went to the goddess and that Terl will begin the purification process. Judging by what you say about the god from Earth and whatnot, it sounds like she isn’t ours to deal with anymore. You don’t have to worry, Sere.”

Will the goddess give her a verdict, or will she send her back to the god from Earth?

“How is Terl?”

“He has his free will back. He told us ‘I can’t apologize enough’ before he left.”

“Okay... So he’s not with Schneider anymore.”

I remembered Schneider’s beat-up state the last time I’d seen him.

“Speaking of which, what were the circumstances of Schneider’s reincarnation?” Lou asked. I didn’t know, though. I’d been crying and too concerned with myself.

“The goddess didn’t say anything about him, and I didn’t think to ask at the time... Sorry. But I think it was separate from Maribelle’s reincarnation.”

“It could just be a coincidence, or maybe another god had him reincarnated...”

“What is Schneider doing now?” I asked Gillain. Even though I was asking about a different nation’s affairs, I knew there was no information that an emperor wouldn’t have access to. I vaguely remembered him having spies in every nation.

“The King of Judore has him under house arrest. He’s cooperating with interrogations. He seems concerned about you.”

“Huh...”

Without Terl around, three S-rankers could easily subdue him. I could trust Gil in that regard. I wondered what verdict Judore would give him...but it didn’t have anything to do with me anymore. I believed his promise to never interfere with me again.

I heaved a sigh that I’d been holding in, and Gillain looked at me with concern. “Are you tired, Sere? You should lie down. We’ve kept you for a while.”

“No, I’m okay. This was necessary, anyway. I wanted to know what was going on.”

“Get better soon so that you can move...so that Trundle can give you

permission. Galé is warmer than here. I have the Twilight Palace set up for you to rest.”

Gillain, both now and in my past life, created places for me to belong. *Also, I didn't realize I'm not allowed to move without my grandmother's permission now...*

“Sere, if you don't recover soon, Gillain is going to be malnourished,” Lou teased.

That's true. Gillain's been going through a lot, all because of me.

“I'm sorry, Gillain.” I kissed the dark circles under his eyes with all the gratitude and love I had, taking his exhaustion for myself. *I can't believe I get to do this routine again...*

Gillain tilted his head and kissed me in return, pouring his magic into me. *Why the coffee refill...? I'm already full of way too much magic from different people...*

When Gillain took his lips from mine, he suddenly knit his eyebrows. Still supporting my back with his right hand, he lifted my bangs with his left hand, revealing my forehead. For just an instant, there was a flash of light around me.

“Sere... What's this gold line around your forehead?”

“Sere...!”

“Miss Sere!”

“Gillain, give Sere a mirror!”

Gillain took a hand mirror from the dressing table and gave it to me. I looked at my forehead in it, clueless as to what the issue was.

A thin lemon-yellow line ran across my forehead, just below my hairline. It seemed to continue into my hair. When I touched it, I felt a static shock.

This sensation... This must be something crazy!

“Sere... You must have some idea, right? You can tell us. I won't be angry,” Lou said coolly.

I legitimately forgot...until right this second...

“When the goddess said goodbye to me, she bit my head... Then a gold ring closed in around my head...”

“I knew it! The goddess’s blessing!”

“She took in your magic from your head?! Was it mutual?”

“You mean her tear...? She did drop one on my head...”

“The goddess’s golden teardrop?!”

“Miss Sere! That’s huge!”

No waaay!

Asu sighed. “Sere, that’s a Golden Band.”

“A what now?”

My wise mother Asu explained it to me as he took a good look at my forehead. “The goddess essentially put a bell on you. As someone who has her favor, you’ll have her protection if anything dangerous like Maribelle crosses your path again. Also...”

“Also?”

“The goddess can see everything you do, and if you do anything bad, the band will tighten around your head and cause you unimaginable pain...”

“Gaaah!” *Just like Sun Wukong?!*

“Well, Miss Sere doesn’t do bad things, so if the goddess is protecting her... That makes it a good thing! No worries!”

“Hmm... Since you can feel the goddess’s breath from this holy mark, this means she’s fond of you. You’ll be fine as long as you don’t pull any malicious pranks. No worries, Sere!”

Gillain squeezed my cheeks together and met eyes with me.

“Hey, that hurts...”

“Sere, you’ve been accepting magic left and right from people other than me... It’s almost cheating at this point.”

Hey, come on! This was an act of goddess!

While I was dripping with cold sweat under serious pressure from the Emperor of Galé, Lou and Asu were tasting Matsuki's new creation, ice cream with Marschean matcha, with no concern for me.

"Psst... Lou, eat this and cool your head a little!"

Munch, munch... "This god of Earth or wherever put my Sere through so much pain... They're gonna get what's coming to them..."

"Wait until Sere is recovered, at least. And talk to the goddess about it first. Well, I don't think she'll stop you, since she gave Sere her first holy mark in two thousand years, so Sere is basically in her pocket... But with things as they are right now..." *Munch, munch.*

"I know, you're going to say I'm not powerful enough to cross over to another world, right? The goddess said I don't have to be purified this time. I'll take this opportunity to go to my holy ground, double my magic power, and triple my sand density... My Matsuki is as talented as ever..."



I recovered peacefully, spoiled by everybody. Not only that, but I was able to graduate from knight school—despite not having enough attendance days—thanks to Alma, Nick, and the rest of my classmates. I was finally following in my grandmother's and mother's footsteps!

As I recuperated, I took care of government affairs for Trundle and Galé.

"Serephi, if you want to go to the Galé Founding Day celebration, you'd better get at least ten billion gold in rebuilding fees for the mansion from Gilbert!"

"Huh? But you can't possibly need ten billion..."

"We're going to err on the high side, silly!"

My grandmother was merciless even to Gil...but the person holding Gil's purse strings was my papa! He had ended up supporting Judore's recovery as the Minister of Finance after all. *I only have a week to go until Founding Day... How am I supposed to pull that off...?*

"Sere, you have to depart for Galé today! You're already two weeks behind..."

Gillain is furious!” Asu couldn’t wait and came to get me.

What?! Nooo!

As I slumped across my desk, the door clicked open, and my brother rushed in. *That’s funny, I thought you were supposed to be filling in for our father in the Granzeus domain while he’s in the capital?*

“Serephione, big trouble! Matsuki went to train as a warrior in the Dysetzu Commonwealth and got kidnapped!”

“Huh?! Why would he go somewhere so politically unstable?!”

“I tried to stop him, but he said he wanted to learn the traditional cuisine of Dysetzu to please you and the holy beasts...”

The silly fluffball on my head started to shake. *Oh... It’s all over now...*

“Unacceptable... Completely unacceptable! How dare they do that to my Matsuki! Sere, let’s go!”

Lou immediately grew to full size, picked me up by the scruff of my neck, and leaped out of the window!

“Gaaah!”

“Serephi?!”

“Serephione!”

“Wait! Sere! Lou! Miyu! Don’t leave me behind!” Asu yelled. “What am I, your scapegoat?!”

It was time to commemorate our first adventure after my revival: the Quest to Save Matsuki!



Miyu whispered quietly from her master’s pocket as said master, whose soul had left her body, clung resignedly to Lou’s back.

“Appraisal!”

Her master shone blue.

“Wow, I knew my Miss Sere would be really impressive now...!”

Serephione Granzeus (Daughter of a count, S-rank adventurer, head of the Trundle house, empress-to-be of Galé, contracted with Loudarylphena and Miyu-geld, blood relative of Asucariela, under protection of Kilamageld, Maganvar, and Terlnight, beloved by all gods)

Status: Weakened, magic deficiency (80% recovered)

Skills: All magic, reincarnated, revived from death, short lance, shuriken, poison resistance, phoenix blood, loved by every god



Afterword

Thank you for reading Volume 3 of *Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer!*

Sere is finally going to confront Maribelle, the heroine of *Wild Rose*. Will Lou fall under her charm again? Will Sere be condemned as the villainess according to the plot? I hope you remember all of Sere's efforts up to this point and cheer for her to win against fate.

Spoiler warning from this point on.

I think every author gets story ideas differently, but in my case, I see images in my head. This series was based on three images that I got. The first was the scene with Lou frolicking in the snow that I wrote about in my first afterword. The second was the climax of this volume, where the heroine is torn as two of her loved ones fight each other. The third was the heroine awakening in the despairing hero's embrace through the power of his love. I made this work by fleshing out and connecting those three images with a wholesome, enjoyable story.

What I mean to say by this is, I really wanted to get this third volume published! I'd only been able to fit one of those three images in the first two volumes, after all.

When I was putting together the first volume, due to page count limitations, I had to choose between introducing General Avenger or adding an intermission about Alma. Were the first volume going to be a stand-alone work, I think it would have been more effective to liven up Sere's fun knight school life if I had given more background on Alma. But in order to get to the ending that I had in my head, I had to introduce the general. I bet on the fact that I would be able to publish the whole story and believed in those in charge.

In hindsight, I'm glad I had the courage to choose the general. And beyond that, I also added a lot of foreshadowing that I could only call back to with this

volume. My desire to not leave those details as mysteries reached the readers, and the readers' desire to see what happens next reached the publishers, which is why I had the opportunity to finish the story. I feel very fulfilled. I hope all of you are satisfied too.

Also, good news: the first volume of the manga is being released the same month as this third volume! Sere in this third volume turned seventeen and matured overall (she really looks like a big sister in the cover art!), so going from this to the comic makes me feel like a grandma thinking, "Look how much my little Sere has grown..." Keep some tissues nearby while you read. My personal fave (as expected?) is our demon lord papa.

And with that, thank you once again.

Thanks to my editor Y, who took me from just a fantasizing bookworm to releasing three volumes of a story, and thanks as well to everyone involved in publication. Thanks also to Tobi for lovingly drawing Sere and the fluffballs, as well as Tasuke Sakura for depicting the bonds and coolness of the Granzeus family in the manga adaptation.

Thanks also to everyone who was first to cry tears of joy together for the web version when Sere ended up happy in the end, and to everyone who purchased the print editions and stuck with me until the third volume. We were able to come to this finale thanks to all of your support. I can't thank you enough.

Lastly, the one person who went through the most, my beloved Serephone. Sorry for putting you through so much suffering just because I like misfortune. My message for Sere at the end of her journey is...

"Screw you and Gillain for having a fulfilling love life!"

I hope from time to time you picture Sere, Lou, Asu, and Miyu being all lovey-dovey at the swamp, the three drunkards at the guild being scolded by Lara, the Granzeus family happily eating Matsuki's cakes in their snowy domain, Sere and Lou soaring through the open sky, and Sere and Gillain's somewhat vexing, yet intimate, relationship.

I will forever treasure the connections I've made through *Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer!* At the end of this letter, I would like to wish you all the best in the future.

I hope we can meet again somewhere.

Hiro Oda



"I'm the
heroine!
I can't
lose!"

Heroine vs.
Villainess
The final
battle of the
reincarnated!

Forget Being the
VILLAINESS,
I Want to Be an
ADVENTURER!

3

"I'll end this
between us
if it's the
last thing
I do!"



I love
my whole
family!

Thank you all.
We've always
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and we always
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Forget Being the **VILLAINESS,** I Want to Be an **ADVENTURER!**



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Author
Hiro Oda

Illustrator
Tobi



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Forget Being the Villainess, I Want to Be an Adventurer! Volume 3

by Hiro Oda

Translated by Kim Louise Davis Edited by Zubonjin

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Illustrations by Tobi

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